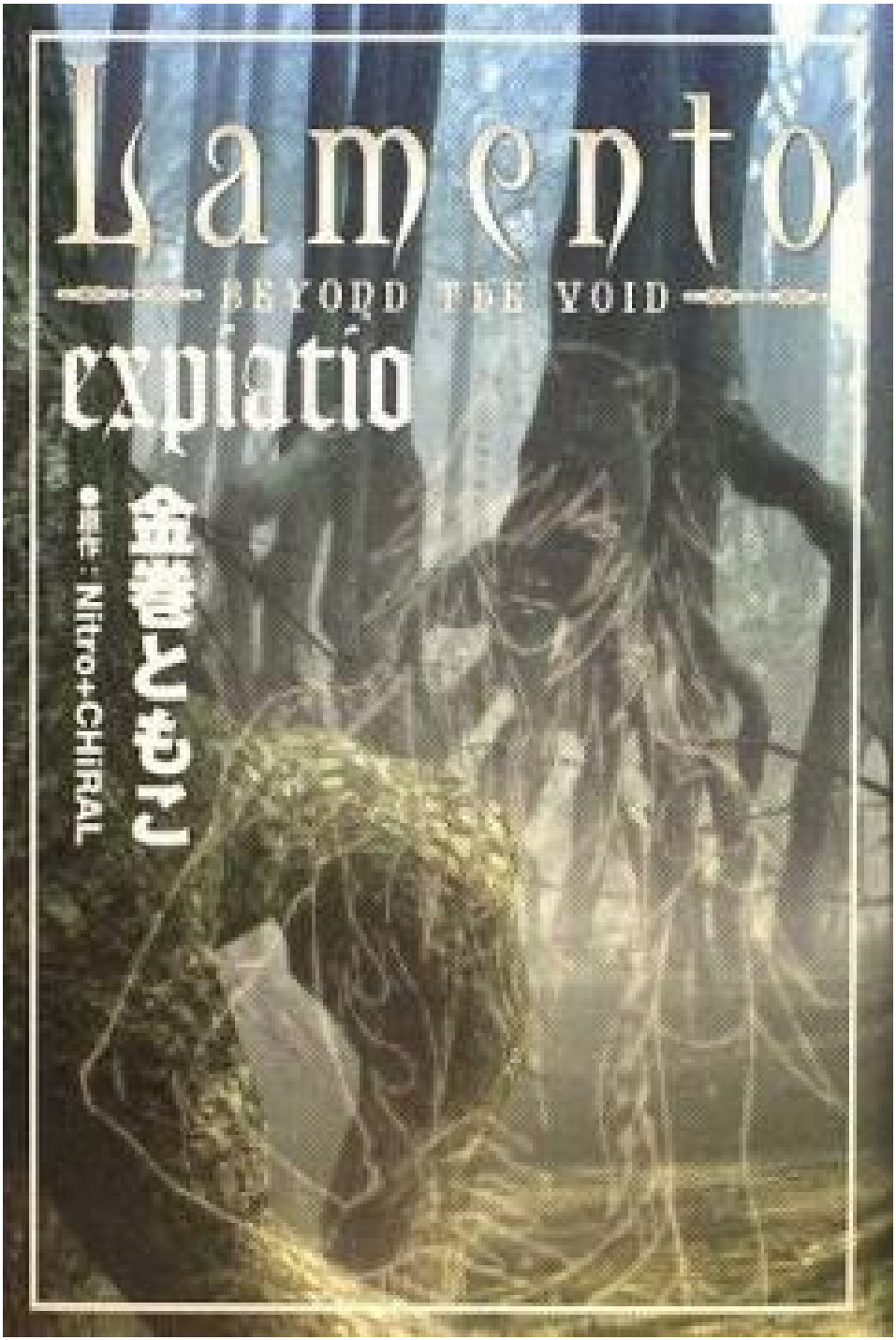
Lamento
BEYOND THE VOID
expiatio
金巻ともこ
原作：Nitro+CHIRAL

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Lamento Beyond the Void Expiatio (Tomoko Kanemaki/N＋C) Prologue

Please read my **disclaimer**~
Initium

A single cat ran through the dim forest.
This forest was also being encroached upon by the “void”.
The “void”.
That so called phenomenon covered the world.
The world was changing its form, as if it were rejecting all living things.
Everything that had been affected by the “void” rejected the cats, the green trees harmed them like blades.
The world had changed.
Running through the forests ravaged by the void while chasing after prey was dangerous even for the most experienced traveling cats, or even for the greatest bounty hunters.
However, a cat ran through it as his silver hair fluttered behind him.
The silver cat took a large leap and hid in the shadow of the trees.
The rustle of the leaves under his feet made a loud sound.

“Over there!”

He heard a voice yell.
Figuring the owner of the yell knew where he was hiding, the silver cat kicked off to the ground.
The silver cat’s right eye was covered by an eye patch.
The one that was uncovered was a blue eye—his left eye narrowed slightly, there were traces of light from the shining Moon of Light in it.

“Where did you go!?”

A cat yelled as he swung his sword blindly.
The silver cat—Rai, smiled calmly then appeared in front of that cat.

“Right here.”

He swung his sword down at almost the same time he had spoke.
Instantly, like a still image, he could see the flesh and bone from his opponent’s wound.
The deep red bodily fluid, as if to cover that flesh, spurt out and dyed Rai’s cheek red.
He should have killed him without getting showered in blood, but who said he was a great bounty hunter?
Rai looked down at the cat’s convulsing corpse.
This cat, that was just a moment ago yelling and swinging his sword around, would never move by his own will ever again.
Was his face the last thing his opponent saw in his final moments?
Blood continued to gush out of the cat’s body.
There was the rustling sound of the wind blowing by.
Rai stared at the fallen corpse before him.
At that moment, he suddenly felt pain in his right eye that should have been dead.
It seemed to be a premonition of things to come.
It made its existence known together with his heartbeat, the pain, and the traces of fever.
The afterimage of green—it was a snake.
Rai’s body fell as if he was sinking into the ground.

Inside of a cave, all he could hear was his own breathing.
His opponent—his prey, should also have been there, but he was seized with the feeling that he was the only one there.
The cave was dim, so his vision was poor.
His prey was a dragon.
A disgusting green dragon that devoured sacrifices.
Its shiny scales were each sharp like a blade that could harm anything near it.
Together with the wind, the dragon’s tail appeared before Rai’s eyes and grazed his body.
Rai jumped.
He swung his sword down toward the dragon’s face—and cut across

both of the dragon's eyes.
Rai kicked the dragon's chin in order to move away from it, but its claws grazed his face.
He changed his stance, but it was a moment too late.
Its claws gouged Rai's right eye.
At the same time, its tail struck Rai's body and sent him flying.
Rai hit the ground as his lips felt the blood pouring out from his right eye.
A metallic taste spread inside his mouth.
The right side of his vision was covered in darkness and painfully flickered red.
The dragon roared, scattering blood as it shook its head.
Using his sword stuck in the ground to support himself, Rai tried to stand up.
The dragon squirmed.
He couldn't let it escape—if it escaped he wouldn't be able to stop it.
Contrary to his urgency, he was unable to gather strength to his body.
His right eye throbbed—his body ached.
Rai slowly stood up and pulled his sword out of the ground.
He then readied his sword and once again ran toward the dragon.
But at that moment, the dragon disappeared with a roar from before Rai.

His whole body broke into a sweat as his consciousness was pulled back.
Chills left the uncomfortable feeling of his hair standing on end.
It was a dream—before him was the corpse of a cat.
He wasn't sure how long he had lost consciousness.
Rai lifted himself up then looked at the corpse in surprise as he sat there.
Insects had already started to swarm the body.
Feeling his cheek twitch, he wiped it, but even though there should have been the blood splatter from earlier, it had already dried and some crust fell to the ground when he rubbed it.
The green snake—the dragon.
Why did he have that sort of dream in a place like this?
At least he didn't have that dream very often.
That dream—the dream about the time he lost his right eye.

Rai shook his heavy head slightly, then pressed his hand against his right eye on top of his eye patch.
He didn't feel pain there anymore.
He shouldn't have felt pain there in the first place.
Since it was a wound that healed long ago.
But, Rai was tormented by something like a smoldering ember haunting his right eye.
That pain—.
Suddenly there was the rustling sound of several cats running.
Rai's ears stood straight as he put his hand on the hilt of his sword.
Were the companions of that cat he killed coming after him?

"Gyaah!"

He heard a scream.
Somehow it seemed like it had nothing to do with him.
Rai got up and ran towards the direction of the scream.
He saw the backs of several cats.
It seemed to be cats that looked like bandits chasing after something.
It appeared that one of the cats running had been injured.
It was probably done by the cat running away from them.
Rai rushed to keep up with the running group of cats.
Focused on their prey, they didn't seem to notice Rai.
He saw up ahead the cat they were chasing after trip over a tree root and lose his balance.
At that moment, the black hood the cat was wearing slipped off and exposed his ears.
He was a cat with pitch black ears.
His tail was also black.
An ominous cat—instantly Shisa's old legend crossed his mind.
When the one with black ears and a black tail with black markings appear, this world will be consumed by chaos.
It was a stupid superstition.
The bandits surrounded the black cat and closed in on him slowly.
One of them started to swing down a stone axe.
Rai pierced that cat with his sword.

"Gyaaahhh!!"

The stabbed cat let out a scream.

At almost the same moment, he repelled another cat with a body blow then ran his sword across another one's neck.
He took his sword away from the cat spouting blood out of his mouth.
The blood clinging thickly to his sword made it less efficient.
When he shook off the blood from his sword he felt a gaze on his back.
He turned around to see the black cat staring at him.
Actually, *glaring* may have been more accurate.
The moment their gazes met, a scream from a bandit tore them away.

"Bastard, who are you!?"

The bandit drew his sword.

"Go."

The black cat didn't move at the words he muttered.
He could do whatever he wanted.
He'd help this cat and probably never see him again.
Besides, even if this black cat lost his life here, it had nothing to do with Rai.
Rai kicked off the ground and swung his sword toward the bandits coming after him.
There was the impact transmitting from his sword, scattered blood, and screams.
Once several dead bodies fell inside of the forest, Rai was finally aware that the cat had disappeared.

Lamento Beyond the Void Expiatio (Tomoko Kanemaki/N＋C) Chapter 1

Caput 1

Rai always got information about bounties from a bar in the back alleys of Ransen.
Ransen—was the largest city in the center of Shisa.
Built on ‘two stick’ ruins, it was a large town where things, cats, and information all gathered.
Shisa was an island country surrounded by a coral reef.
Having a central formation of several villages around Ransen, it hadn’t had much interaction from the surrounding countries.
The lord of Ransen ceremoniously rules over all of Shisa, but each of the villages have their own system of governing, so he rarely interfered.
You could say that Shisa was a self-governed country composed of small villages.
He had heard there was prey in the forest near Ransen, so he was going there for the bounty.
There was a secret hideout in the forest to go to for bounties.
Normally, a cat could live comfortably off a bounty for about a year.
Bounties were the only thing he worked for.
Rai was in fact a bounty hunter.
He’d swing his sword, take down the bounty, and collect the money.
It was the sort of occupation that depended on his own strength and sword.
Bounties weren’t always necessarily cats.
Lately there had been a lot of bounties for demons.
Once the ‘void’ started to cover the world, the number of demon sightings had increased.

Rai was currently in the forest to capture that sort of bounty.

He had been searching the area since yesterday, but hadn't been able to find the demon he was aiming for.
No one from the hideout in the forest near the city had been able to find it either, and there were doubts it even existed in the first place.
It appeared that there were several other bounty hunters coming into the forest.
The Moon of Light rose and the Moon of Shadows disappeared.
It was better to sleep and regain his strength, but it'd be an unfortunate inconvenience if a business rival got to the bounty before him.
Not sleeping for a day was no big deal.
Besides, he figured that no matter how many bounty hunters came into the forest, the bounty would just run away.
He could sense cats hiding from something and trying to run away.

Since that day—the day he felt pain in his right eye, his nerves had been continuously on edge.
It was probably because of the small glowing ember in the depths of his right eye that made him kill those bandits he didn't need to kill and help that cat on a whim.
That ember was vexing Rai.
And then there was that dream—of the green dragon and then the snake.
It was a dream he rarely had, and up until now had never had in a place or situation like that.
He thought it was over already.
His nerves were agitated as if they were a writhing snake.
Rai knew the only way he could hold back that irritation was by swinging his sword.
The forest was stirring.
He looked around for a presence holding their breath in the shadows of the surrounding trees.
He could see two cats in the distance.
Those two guys were here, huh—.
He recognized a striped cat and a cat with black spots.
They were a pair of business rivals.
A pair—the two of them added up to a "Sanga" and a "Touga".

Cats were basically a fighting species.
Cats proficient in battle were the “fighters” called Touga.
Then there were Sanga, the cats that were the “singers”.
The word sing—may actually be a faulty expression.
The Sanga “sings” and raises the Touga’s strength, backing him up in battle.
The power of a Sanga wasn’t something just anyone had.
The actual strength of a Touga didn’t matter, anyone could call himself one with enough training and accumulated strength, but a Sanga consisted of a special power they were born with.
Furthermore, it was a special power few cats could say they were able to manifest.
Rai had never heard a Sanga sing for him before.
A ‘pair’ of cats were a threat.
For example, even if the Touga was a cat with strength inferior to himself, if he had the power of a Sanga, his strength would increase several fold.
A single Touga would reach his limit.
It’d be dangerous if those guys found him.
Even though they were bounty hunters like him, they didn’t exactly get along.
Rather, given the chance, either of them would kill each other in their sleep.
Since jobs were scarce, of course it’d be better if there were less cats doing the same job.
At that moment, he felt a presence move.
Was it those guys?
Rai swung his sword down in a flash.
Sparks flew, as his sword was intercepted.
Before him was a cat wearing a black hood.
Beneath his coat appeared to be a black tail peeking out.
Rai recognized the cat, but not as the striped or black spotted cat.
It was the black cat he had helped the other day.
The black cat was glaring back at him as he desperately held back his sword.
He was easily dealt with, but for now he wanted to avoid the situation of those guys finding him.

“……kh,……”

The black cat took a step back.

“Take that……ngh!”

The cat repelled his sword and jumped back.
Rai quietly stared at the cat glaring back at him.
The events from that day—that dream, that dragon, that snake, all crossed the back of his mind.
It was bothersome.
Rai slowly readied his sword.

“……uwh……kh.”

There seemed to be something strange about the cat before his eyes.
However, there was no time for confusion.
Those two guys were also nearby.
Rai took a small breath as he swung his sword down at that cat’s head.
The sound of metal echoed throughout the forest.
That was the signal.
The signal for a time where all thoughts stopped and all he could feel was the fight.
As his short sword continued to be held back, Rai pulled out the long sword that had been on his back.
The cat before his eyes was desperately holding back the short sword, so he’d probably be helpless if he were to inflict another blow.

“……uwaaah!!”

The cat let out a cry.
He repelled the short sword and intercepted the long one.
Rai took a step back as the cat rushed toward him.
The cat in front of him was frantic.
They exchanged blows lunged at each other, repelled them, then jumped back.
Instantly, the cat crouched down low and sprung toward Rai’s upper body.
His claws cut into his arm.
The black cat plunged into a grove of trees, kicked off one of them,

and jumped toward him.
The cat brandished his large sword as he flew down from the air.
Rai repelled his attack and thrust his sword from behind the cat as he landed.

“—kh!”

The tip merely grazed the cat’s arm.
He was a considerably faster cat than he looked.
Rai looked down at the black cat.
Blood was running down his arm.
Red blood.

“Not bad.”

He spoke to him, but the cat didn’t let down his guard.
He directed his unconcealed hostility toward him.
Rai sheathed his short sword and pushed back his coat.
The same red color was there.
There was a red line that stood out on the place where claws had grazed him earlier.
He ran a finger along the small amount of blood dripping down and licked it.
The vigilant cat in front of him didn’t move.

“You, where are you from? What’s your name?”

The cat Rai spoke to gave him a blatantly angry expression.

“……you tell me first.”

The cat spat his words out as if he were trying to respond in accordance to the situation.
Even though it wouldn’t be strange for him to be killed if he made a single mistake, the cat glared right back at him.
He didn’t hate that sort of strong will, but he should choose a place and time for it.
Besides, it definitely wasn’t something you said to the benefactor of this cat’s life.

“I’m the one asking you.”

The cat before him furrowed his brows.
Rai continued to press him for answers.

“You’re that cat from before, aren’t you? Behaving like that without a single word of thanks. You’ve got some nerve.”

“No one asked you to do anything.”

“Well said.”

Rai thrust his long sword into the ground and laughed.
He was making excuses like a child.

“At that time, if I hadn’t shown up, you would have been killed. Unless you wanted to die?”

The cat got quiet as he growled lowly with his tail puffed out.

“Don’t get so angry. Cats that let the blood rush to their head, die fast. They easily lose sight of their surroundings.”

Once he said those mocking words to him, the cat’s hair instantly stood on end as he started to yell.

“Shut up. What the hell is wrong with you? What do you want with me?”

“Prone to snarling too, huh?”

Rai said surprised as he looked down at the cat.

“……shut up!”

The cat lunged at him.
Rai parried the attack, leaving his long sword pierced into the ground.
Then as he evaded the cat that lunged at him, he kicked at his feet hard.
As if his feet had slipped on something, the cat tumbled.
When the cat tried to get up, he took his long sword out of the ground and thrust it back in again next to the cat.

“You got caught up in that predictable move, huh.
Didn’t I just say it?
Cats that let the blood rush to their head, die quickly.”

“You……!”

Rai leaned against the sword pierced into the ground and looked down at the cat.

“I’ll ask you again. Where are you from and what do they call you?”

He didn’t answer.

“Stubborn, aren’t you?”

Rai said with a sigh, but the cat finally opened his mouth.

“……why do you even want to know?”

He didn’t have any particular reason, but if he didn’t give him a reason, he had a feeling the cat wouldn’t comply.

“You’re the cat who wounded me. It isn’t all that strange to want to know about him.”

“Are you that confident in your skills?”

The cat went on to ask.

“My story isn’t important. Right now, I’m asking about you. Speak.”

The cat got quiet.

“I’m not a very patient person. If you’d like a hole opened up in your face, keep quiet.”

Rai looked straight at the cat.
His body language showed he was reluctant, but eventually the cat opened his mouth.

“……Konoe. A Karou cat.”

The cat named Konoe mumbled without taking his eyes away from him.

“Karou, huh.”

Karou was a small village in the southwest of Shisa.
He heard it was a village where an extremely vigilant smaller species lived.

“I answered you, didn’t I? Take your sword away.”

He indulged the cat’s arrogantly spat out wish and sheathed his long sword.
Even though Konoe let out a small sigh of relief, he once again glared back at him.

“Now it’s your turn. What’s your name?”

“It’s Rai.”

He answered, but then was immediately asked another question.

“From?”

“Setsura.”

It had been a while since he spoke the name of his hometown.
His hometown was west of Ransen. It had been several years since he had been back once he had left.

“Why did you suddenly show up here? And the reason you challenged me all of a sudden?”

Konoe continued to ask more questions.

“You’re a noisy cat, aren’t you? So many questions……but…”

Rai replied as he narrowed his eye at a faraway presence.
Two presences.
He had been discovered by those guys.
Then again, of course they would have noticed them going on like this.

“It doesn’t look like I have time to leisurely answer your questions.”

Rai drew both his swords then plunged towards the presences he felt.

“……hey!”

He heard Konoe’s voice behind him, but didn’t have time to pay him any mind.
He saw the form of the two cats running toward him from the shadow of the trees in front of him.
He intercepted the sword the striped cat brandished in order to repel it.
At almost the same moment the black spotted cat took a step toward him.
Now if Rai tried to escape by retreating back, he’d have to take on both of them.

“What the hell, damn it! You thought you could take it from us this time!?”

“You still haven’t died yet, huh? You should do us all a favor and drop dead already.”

The two of them smiled widely as they spat their words.
As usual the two of them were messing around.

“Sorry, I have no intention of doing so. Give it up.”

Rai said as he casually lowered his sword.

“Give it up? Give it up, he says! You really think I’ll just say ‘sure, why not’ to that?”

“Sure, why not.”

“Shut up, idiot.”

They were a troublesome pair.
Rai prepared himself by taking a deep breath and readying his sword. He couldn’t be caught off guard by a pair of cats.

“Why don’t I shut that insignificant mouth of yours right about now?”

He slowly started to close the distance between them little by little as he spoke.

“Same to you, why don’t you hurry up and disappear? You’re nothing but an eyesore. You’re constantly moving through our area. How many jobs do you think we’ve failed because of you? You owe us payment.”

“I could say the same to you.”

His smile disappeared as he spoke his reply in a low, annoyed voice.
It was one against a pair, but their true strength was equally matched.
Therefore they happen to take on the same jobs, and became business rivals.

“What good timing, we’ll just destroy you here. I learned something new recently. With that, it’ll be a home run.”

The black spotted cat chuckled.
Something new—a “new song.”
The striped cat was a Touga, and the black spotted cat was a Sanga.
Rai’s nerves became tense.
He didn’t have a Sanga for himself.
If he were to compare his strength as a Touga to the strength of the striped cat Touga, he was confident he could overpower his opponent.
However, it was another story with the power of the Sanga.
The striped cat lowered his stance and readied his swords.
The black spotted cat laughed quietly as he unthinkably sheathed his sword.
The striped cat had his two swords in his hands as he dropped down even lower. Then the black spotted cat took a fife out of his breast pocket.
Behind him he heard a rustling sound from Konoe.

“Get out of here.”

Rai told Konoe without looking back.

“You’ll get in the way. If you don’t want to die, then hurry up and disappear.”

He didn’t have time to worry about someone else.
If he did something unnecessary it’d just inconvenience him.

“Could it be they’re—“

At the moment Konoe spoke, the striped cat attacked.
He crossed swords with the striped cat and continued to exchange blows.

“Hurry up! Damned cat! Get that spotted tail moving!”

The striped cat yelled at the spotted cat who hadn’t moved yet with the flute in his hand.

“I got it, shut up already! Get off my back! And be quiet!”

Once it was silent, a sound emitted from the spotted cat’s flute.
This was his song.
A light enveloped the spotted cat’s body then flowed to the striped cat.
Then the striped cat’s presence changed.
The light became strength, as if it were overflowing from him.

“You’re too slow, idiot.”

The striped cat told the spotted cat as he laughed, but he was already thrusting his swords towards Rai.

“Uraaaah!!”

He repelled the immense force of his swords.
His sword continued to smash into his at a violent speed.
This wasn’t good.
He couldn’t get an opening with the cat receiving the song.

“……kh.”

Riding on the sound of the flute, the striped cat thrust his sword over and over again as if he were accelerating.
His overpowering speed made him a completely different cat than before.

“It’s different from before, isn’t it? It’s a new song. It’s a song that bestows the power of the wind to the Touga. Has a nice feel, yeah?”

He took his flute away from his mouth to speak.
Even in that interval the striped cat didn’t stop his blows.
The particles of light emitting from the spotted cat’s body wrapped around the striped cat and made his body as light as the wind.

“Can’t you sing with a little more force!?”

The striped cat yelled.

“Shut up, I’m perfectly in tune! It’s your skill that sucks, hurry up and kill him!”

As they exchanged blows, the two of them argued frivolously back and forth, giving him an opening.
Rai clicked his tongue without thinking.
He could probably retreat at this moment.
Rai ducked then ran towards the grove of trees.
However, he wasn’t as fast as the striped cat that had the power of the wind.

“Running away!?”

“Kh……!”

The striped cat grabbed Rai’s tail.

His body became entangled with the striped cat’s.
In this position swords would just get in the way.
Dirt flew as he violently wrestled with the striped cat on the ground.
At that moment the sound of the flute grew stronger, hurting his ears, bestowing more power to the striped cat.
His claws wounded Rai’s skin, boring into his flesh, he was starting to lose his own strength little by little.

Suddenly, he heard a cry.
He turned his gaze toward it and saw Konoe had attacked the spotted cat.

“Hey!”

The striped cat in front of Rai turned toward Konoe and ran.

“……you stupid cat!!”

Rai lifted himself up and tried to chase after the striped cat, but the pain he was feeling all through his body prevented him from doing so.
The striped cat attacked Konoe. The yelling continued and dirt flew as all three cats grappled.
He got up and grabbed the sword he had thrown to the ground.
When he got close to the three of them grappling—he heard a song.
He heard the soothing melody of a song, but in actuality he wasn’t hearing it with his ears.
It was probably the song of a Sanga—but whose?
The answer was clear.
It was Konoe’s song.
A song and light overflowed from Konoe’s body, and flowed into Rai.
He was releasing—a song and light.

“Gwah!?”

Rai grabbed the striped cat’s tail as if he were going to rip it off and flung him off of Konoe.

“Gyaah!!”

He moved on to the spotted cat.
Rai freely swung the swords in both his hands chasing after the two cats.
The song was certainly bestowing strength to his body and heart.
It was an overwhelming strength.
Even though it was faint, what he felt in his body was comforting.
It felt good.
The impact from his sword transmitted through his arm to his

spine, tingling.
More.
More.
Send more and more.
The two of them came at him one at a time, and at the same time swung their swords in front of him.
Then the song became even more powerful and bestowed even more strength into Rai.
With an intense impact, Rai repelled both of the cats' swords.
The song he was hearing—was Konoe's.

"……damn it."

"He's paired up……I hadn't heard……"

The two of them mumbled breathlessly.

"Let's end this here."

Rai sheathed his short sword and turned his long sword toward the two of them.

"……right, guess we should go."

"Run away!"

The two of them both ducked at the same time and jumped towards the grove of trees.

"Wait!"

As soon as he lowered himself to chase after the two of them, Konoe came into sight.
The calming light brown eyes looking at Rai stopped his movement.
The presence of the two cats grew fainter, but there was something he wanted to know more than anything else right now.

"……is it all right not to go after them?"

Konoe asked in a quiet voice.

"You……"

He wasn't sure how he should tell him.
Konoe's song was gone.
But he really did hear that song from him.
Rai hesitated for a moment as he chose his words, then once again opened his mouth.

"I heard a song. From you."

"……a song?"

Konoe asked back.

"It echoed directly into my head, a wordless song. At the same time I heard the song, I was filled with strength. It felt like a sleeping energy had been awakened."

A special melody—full of strength. A Sanga's song.

"……I had no idea, it would have that sort of effect."

That was said more to himself.
A Sanga's song had this sort of power—.
He couldn't be a pair of cats as just a single Touga.
It was the kind of power that made him wonder, what had he been doing with himself until now?

"You—could it be, you're a Sanga?"

Konoe's eyes widened at his words.

"……I'm a Sanga?"

His expression looked as if he were startled.

"Yes."

He looked down at Konoe who was still sitting on the ground.
Konoe's wide eyes were filled with clear confusion.

"Don't tell me you've never sung before."

Konoe nodded.

Did a song from a Sanga who had never sung before have that much power?
Did he witness the moment a Sanga's power had manifested.

"Looks like I witnessed a rather valuable moment."

Rai muttered as he smirked.
This was fortunate.
Meeting an unpaired Sanga wasn't something that just happens.

"In that case, I'll confirm it. It's something a Touga can feel. You're a Sanga."

Konoe lowered his head and kept quiet.
Even if he knew he was a Sanga, being told he had this sort of power all of a sudden, of course he'd be at a loss.
Rai watched Konoe closely, waiting for a reply.

"……that's probably not true."

Konoe muttered his reply quietly.
Was a Sanga really like this?
He thought it was strange that this was the impression he got from a cat that just found out he had a special power that not many were capable of.
But he wanted the power of a Sanga.
Overflowing with strength—it was so alluring to him, it excited even his nerves.
"You'll realize it sooner or later. Since a power like this managed to manifest in you, it'd be a waste to not use it. There are plenty of people who want to possess it, but cannot."

"Use it, how……?"

Konoe continued to avert his gaze, he wouldn't look at him at all.
The look in his eye when he was all worked up with him earlier was like a lie now.

"Can you remember anything from when you sang the song?"

When he asked, Konoe's gaze looked as if he were trying to think, but he shook his head.

Rai sheathed his long sword then stared at Konoe closely.
He couldn't remember, so he didn't know a way to manifest his power.

"In that case, you're saying that this time was just a coincidence. Then until it stabilizes, you'll probably need to train."

"Train……?"

Konoe finally lifted his gaze. He grabbed those shoulders.
Konoe reflexively averted his gaze from Rai's.

"……let go."

"Come with me."

"……huh?"

Konoe questioned back at his words.

"I'll help you. In order to improve your Sanga abilities."

Konoe's eyes widened. Then his gaze turned stern.
He used considerable strength to shake his hands off of him.
He seemed to have made Konoe angry somehow.
Konoe glared directly at him.

"What? If you have something to say, say it."

"That's enough already. I didn't ask for anyone's help, and I didn't say I'd go with you. Don't just decide for me."

The words he violently spat out was the same as his first impression of him. He was like a child.

"Then what do you want to do?"

When asked, Konoe got quiet and averted his gaze.
He hadn't thought about what he said, and hit a wall.

"……answer some questions. About earlier. If you do, I'll think about it.

Thinking that he looked like someone who'd make some sort of excuse, Konoe once again lifted his face and glared at Rai.

"……fine."

Even though Konoe's emotions were rubbing him the wrong way, he had no choice.

"First of all, when those bandits had attacked me, you let me escape. Even so, the moment you run into me today, you suddenly attack me. Just what were your intentions?"

Konoe asked as if he were trying to choose his words carefully.

"That time with the bandits was just a whim. I just wanted to get rid of some small prey. That's it."

Konoe looked at him seriously as he answered. Rai continued to speak.

"Today I was testing your strength. To see how skilled you were."

"Testing my strength……? Why did you feel the need to do that?"

Konoe continued to ask.

"If you were skilled, it would have been fun. If you weren't that skilled, eventually you'd be killed by bandits or demons anyway, and that would be the end of you. It'd be no different if I would have killed you earlier."

That was the honest truth.

"……so, you're just a highway murderer."

Konoe said as if he were disgusted.

"I guess. If that's what you want to call me, I don't mind at all."

Konoe looked displeased as he furrowed his brow.
After a moment of silence, Konoe once again opened his mouth.

"And those two from earlier?"

“Colleagues. Though I guess I should say, business rivals.”

“Business rivals……?”

Konoe asked back.

“There’s a hideout in the forest near Ransen where information about bounties pass through. Of course there would be other guys coming into the forest. We were fighting over bounties when you appeared.”

“Bounties……you’re a bounty hunter?”

Konoe asked as he looked at him in awe.
He guessed there weren’t any cats in Karou that were bounty hunters.
Konoe lifted his face as if he had realized something.

“Is Ransen near here?”

“It’s not far.”

Feeling like it was an unimportant question, Rai answered nonchalantly.

“There’s a path?”

As he nodded to his rapid questions, he knew what he was getting at by the movement of Konoe’s ears.

“You want to go to Ransen?”

“Yes.”

He nodded honestly to his question.

“The reason?”

He didn’t seem to want to answer his next question.

“So, you can ask all the questions, but when questioned you keep quiet. Who’s selfish now?”

Konoe had a clear expression of anger on his face at his words.

“Whatever. What do you intend on doing in the end? Are you coming with me or not, hurry up and decide.”

It’d be great if he could acquire the power of a Sanga, but if it wasn’t what Konoe wanted himself, then there was nothing he could do.
A Sanga’s song would only reach a particular person.
If he were to force him to go with him, there was a possibility his song wouldn’t reach him.
In this case, it was probably to help him. And that’s why only he heard the song.

“……are you going to Ransen?”

Konoe asked, mumbling.

“Yes, I’ll be backtracking for now.”

With all the commotion in the forest, he doubted his bounty would show up.

“…I’ll go with you.”

Konoe said clearly.
He could see absolute certainty in those light brown eyes.

“Follow me.”

He turned away from Konoe and started to walk away.
The Moon of Light was still high.
They should reach Ransen by mid-day.
Konoe who had started walking behind Rai, suddenly stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

He asked turning around, but Konoe silently shook his head.
He then once again started to walk with firm steps.

Lamento Beyond the Void Expiatio (Tomoko Kanemaki/N＋C) Chapter 2

Caput 2

Once the overgrowth of the trees cleared up, buildings arose in the distance.
It was Ransen.
Receiving the evening light, the huge buildings cast shadows, giving it a peculiar atmosphere.

“That’s the city of Ransen.”

He said, turning around toward Konoe, sensing he had stopped behind him.
It couldn’t be helped, anyone seeing the city of Ransen for the first time would be in a daze.
This city with its somewhat inorganic feel and peculiar atmosphere is what made the small island country of Shisa unique.
You couldn’t find another city with such large gray buildings of this sort of material anywhere else.

“It’s a city with numerous “two stick” remains. Buildings, history, even knowledge. That’s why all of Shisa gathers here.”

Rai explained as he walked on.
It appeared that Konoe, who had stopped his feet, made sure to go after him from behind.
“Two sticks” were the name of the beings that created the world who were said to walk on legs that looked like two long sticks.
Rai himself had no interest in legends, but every cat living in Shisa had heard these particular fairy tale-like myths growing up since childhood.
Once the forest had completely opened up and they had stepped

into the city, they came out to the usual traffic of numerous cats coming and going. That's where Konoe once again stopped his feet.

"Don't wander off."

He said as he swung his tail.
The cats coming to this city for the first time are overwhelmed by the buildings to start with, then they're overwhelmed by the amount of cats next.
There were no other cities in Shisa like Ransen.
There were signs and stalls lined up, crowding the narrow streets, with voices calling out here and there.
However, for Rai it was nothing but a typical scene playing out.
Holding onto the presence of Konoe looking around behind him, Rai continued to move forward.
Suddenly he felt that presence behind him disappear.
When he turned around Konoe was nowhere to be found.
Clicking his tongue, Rai looked around the area.
He may have been dragged off behind an alley. A young cat—on top of that, a cat just coming out from the sticks, was an easy target.
He spotted someone in a black hood frantically running out from an alley ahead of the congestion.
It was Konoe.

"……hey!"

When called to, a clearly relieved expression came across his face.

"What are you doing? Didn't I tell you not to wander off?"

Konoe averted his gaze when spoken to.

"Um……"

"I'm guessing you were dragged off behind an alley or something, weren't you?"

He knew he was right by the way Konoe's ears twitched under his hood at his words.
Bull's eye.

Feeling slightly annoyed, he continued to speak in a harsh tone.

"This place is different from Karou or any of its neighboring villages. There are tons of cats here who are better built than you. Don't be caught so defenseless."

Konoe turned his face away seemingly displeased.

"Let's go. Don't wander off again. Who knows what will happen next time."

Rai turned away from Konoe and started to walk.
Konoe frantically followed him from behind.
Once they continued ahead, he saw a sign for an inn before him.
It wasn't his usual inn.
However, if he brought Konoe to his usual inn, things would probably become problematic for him.
There were a lot of bounty hunters in his usual inn, if he took someone as quick tempered as Konoe into a place like that, he could see nothing but trouble.
On top of that, if he brought another cat with him to that inn and just spent the night, there would of course be needless gossip from the cats there.

"Go in."

He said, opening the door, immediately entering the lobby. There was no one behind the counter.
It didn't look like it was a very big inn.
There was only a small table and sofa in the front of the lobby.
On top of the counter, there was piece of paper with something written on it and a small book.

I'm out right now. There is a deferred payment system.
If you're looking for lodging, choose a suitable vacancy from the guest book and leave your signature.

He guessed that book was the guest book.

"……what a ridiculous inn."

Konoe looked a little uneasily at him as he muttered his words

without thinking.

“Should we go somewhere else?”

“No, it’s fine. This one is rather easygoing.”

Rai opened the guestbook and checked for a vacant room. There seemed to be plenty of vacant rooms.
There was small dish full of ink placed next to the guestbook.
He stuck his index finger into the ink and pressed it against an empty room space.
This was probably the end of the procedure.

“Let’s go.”

He said to Konoe before hurrying up the stairs to the second floor.
It wasn’t a bad inn. The polished walls and hallway were old, but well maintained.
It looked like Konoe hadn’t come up yet.
Rai sighed a bit as he checked the room numbers and opened the door.
There were two beds and a small table with a set of chairs, along with a lamp and a barrel with water inside.
It was a rather typically laid out room for an inn.
Rai undid his equipment and opened the window.
The Moon of Light had sunk and the Moon of Shadows was starting to rise, making the outside air flowing into the room cooler.
It was cleaner than his usual lodgings, and much better maintained.
He sat on the bed, having no choice but to wait for Konoe to come in, his mind started to wander.
A Touga meeting an unpaired Sanga was rather fortunate.
However, he severely doubted that someone as hotheaded as Konoe and a bounty hunter that has never worked with anyone other than himself before could work well together.
But, there was no doubt that he was a rare Sanga.
Either way, Konoe was coming to the room way too slow.
Rai clicked his tongue, wondering if he had been dragged to some cat’s room, he exited his own.

When he came down the stairs he saw a cat in a black hood

behind the counter sitting dejectedly with his head lowered.

“……hey.”

When spoken to, Konoe timidly lifted his gaze.

“What are you doing there?”

Rai asked dumbfounded at the clearly agitated Konoe.

“Doing a little……favor.”

“For who?”

“The owner here.”

“What happened to him?”

“He had errands, so he left.”

“…….jeez.”

Rai sighed exaggeratedly at the mumbling Konoe who looked away.

“Stupid cats. You, and the owner here.”

As expected, Konoe didn’t say anything back.
Konoe’s tail drooped gloomily as he lowered his head.

“What a sour face you have.”

“……is it really that weird?”

“It’s weird.”

Konoe lowered his head at his reply.

“Hurry up and go back to the room.”

Rai said as he started to go back up the stairs.
Midway, he looked back and saw Konoe still lowering his head in a slump.

So he was good-natured enough to let the innkeeper push his work on him.
Rai turned away from Konoe and returned to the room alone.

Konoe didn't take much time to come back.
He came into the room looking tired as he inspected the interior, he then opened the window Rai had just closed a moment ago. The Moon of Light had gone down completely, and the Moon of Shadows had risen into the sky.
Konoe seemed relaxed as he let out a small sigh, across from him Rai was checking the wound Konoe had inflicted on his arm.

"Ah……"

Konoe immediately looked away, he must have been worried about it.

"It's nothing serious. Show me yours."

"I'm……fine."

Konoe stopped his hands that were taking off his coat, and shook his head.
He knew something was wrong by the way Konoe's ears lowered beneath his hood.
He was clearly acting strange.
Was he wounded elsewhere?

"What is it?"

"……"

Konoe grasped the hem of the coat he was taking off tightly.

"It's fine, show me."

"No……kh."

He grabbed Konoe's arm to make him face him, but Konoe shook him off roughly.
Rai felt pain run down his cheek, and with that movement Konoe's hood slipped off.

Konoe stood on his guard as his black ears were exposed.
When he wiped his cheek, the back of his hand had blood on it.

“So I’ve been wounded by the same guy twice in one day, huh.”

Konoe’s eyes widened at his words, his pupils narrowing.

“What are you so worried about?”

Konoe didn’t reply to his question.
Rai sighed exaggeratedly to make sure Konoe heard him, but it seemed like Konoe who continued to lower his head hadn’t noticed.
His gaze and his similarly lowered ears seemed to convey he was afraid of something.

“Is it about those ears and tail?”

Konoe’s body jerked in surprise at his annoyed words.

“Even though black is ominous, the way you hide it isn’t common. It’s normal to wonder what had happened to you, when I saw you running through the forest alone, isn’t it?”

Rai spoke his indifferent words as he continued to look at Konoe.
Black cats were ominous, but he knew about that since the first time they met.
Was he hiding something else now?

“……”

Konoe looked as though he was worrying about something as he lifted his face and started to take off his coat.
After his coat, he took off his arm covers—then his shoes.
Rai narrowed his eye at what was beneath them.

“That’s……”

The words came out of his mouth reflexively.
There were black markings raised on his body as if they had been engraved into him.
Rai grabbed Konoe’s arm and looked at those markings.

When the one with black ears, and a black tail with black markings appear, this world will be thrown into chaos.

Shisa's old legend that had crossed his mind when he first met Konoe, suddenly came to mind once again.

"You've had these from long ago?"

"No. They just suddenly appeared. My ears and tail too."

Konoe answered with his head lowered. His words didn't seem to be a lie.

"Black markings, black ears and tail…… The signs of the legendary curse, huh."

He muttered as he continued to look at his markings, but Konoe pulled his arm away.

"Is that why you left Karou? You were aiming for Ransen to find a solution, right?"

Konoe shook his head quietly.

"I couldn't stay in my village. ……so, I had no choice but to head to Ransen."

"I see."

Rai leaned against the wall as he watched Konoe closely. Konoe didn't try to look back at him as he lowered his head, still barefoot.

"Since a curse was placed on you, there should be a way to break it, right?"

"Huh?"

Konoe finally raised his face at Rai's words.

"It shouldn't be impossible. Am I wrong?"

"……there may be. But, what are you trying to say?"

Konoe asked back annoyed.

“If there’s a possibility, you should go look for it. You don’t intend on helplessly dying from your curse, do you?”

“……what are you trying to tell me?”

“Exactly what you’re hearing. Unless you’re telling me that looking for it would just be a pain?”

“……what do you mean!?”

He was just indifferently stating the facts, but Konoe raised his voice as the hair on his tail stood on end.
His gaze was glaring at him sharply.

“I’m saying you should search for that possibility.”

He continued, but Konoe raised his voice even more.

“I know that already without you pointing it out! You expect me to just hurry up and leave to go look for it right now?”

“You really are a stupid cat.”

He was just thinking it, but it came out of his mouth.

“……what!?”

The hair on Konoe’s tail stood on end even more.

“I’m saying you came with me. You agreed to it. That’s why you’re here, right? Even so, why do you feel the need to go at it alone now?”

Konoe let out a calmed down sigh.

“……are you saying you’ll search for a way to lift the curse too?”

“Of course.”

When he answered Konoe’s confused words, Rai lifted himself off the wall he was leaning against and looked at Konoe.

The hair on Konoe's tail was no longer standing on end, but his confusion was expressed by the way his tail swayed back and forth, sweeping across the floor.
He hadn't noticed it earlier, but the tip of Konoe's tail seemed to be crooked.

"What?"

Konoe asked as if he were afraid.

"You're a Sanga. Didn't I say I'd help you raise your ability?"

Having to explain every little thing was a pain.

"……even though I have a curse said to bring about chaos to the world?"

"What about it? It'd be different if you said the moment I touched you I'd disintegrate or something."

Konoe approached Rai as he answered, as if his whole body was denying his surroundings.

"Do you want a Sanga……that badly?"

Konoe's mumbled words were losing their strength.

"I can't say I don't want it. I need strength. But before that, some grand curse or whatever is nothing to fret about."

Konoe lifted his face in surprise.

"What?"

"Um….."

When questioned, Konoe seemed to search for his words at a loss. His gaze had yet to reach him.

"……you're a strange guy. Normally people would be creeped out and stay away."

Konoe's tail beat against the floor a bit.

“It’s normal to judge others by appearance alone, isn’t it?”

Konoe finally looked at Rai when he answered.
Rai continued his words.

“After all, those sort of people are worried about the ones around them. If they do something different from others, they’ll be expelled, or shunned because they’re just afraid of them. If you become like the majority, you won’t get hurt.”

That was something matter of fact for Rai.

“Let me see your wound.”

Saying his words more quietly this time, Konoe obediently held out his arm. The wound had already started to scab, it didn’t appear to be very deep at all.

“If it’s just this, you’ll be fine. For now, just rest for today. Anything else can be thought about tomorrow.”

Rai turned away from Konoe and headed toward the window.
He heard Konoe behind him sit on his bed as if he were collapsing into it.
A curse that will throw the world into chaos, huh…
When Rai turned around to lean against the window, he looked at Konoe.
His black tail—his crooked tail rested on the floor relaxed.
His arm covers and his shoes were off and those markings on his arms and legs illuminated by the lamp, appeared to coil around Konoe’s body.
He said he’d look for a way to lift the curse, but there wasn’t any definite hope.
However, there was no doubt that it was a problem they had to solve as fast as possible.
He had heard there lived a shaman on the outskirts of the forest.
He had the power of foresight and was said to have knowledge of all things in the universe.
It was a rumor, but he had no other leads.
First, they’d have to find the whereabouts of the shaman.
If possible, he’d like to head out to see the shaman tomorrow.

However, there was something they should do before then.
Rai looked at Konoe who had finally started to groom himself on his bed, and spoke.

“Are you tired?”

Konoe lifted his face when he was questioned.

“……pretty much.”

Of course a cat unused to travel escaping the forest would be tired. But, they should move quickly.

“Can you move?”

“……probably.”

“We’re going to train.”

“Huh?”

Without answering Konoe, Rai got dressed in a hurry.

“Now?”

“Now.”

Rai finished getting dressed and left the room without waiting for Konoe.

“W-Wait a sec!”

Konoe ran after him frantically.
From the sound of him noisily coming down the stairs he guessed he had yet to put on his shoes properly.
As usual, there was no one at the counter.

“Why are we doing this all of a sudden?”

“I’m worried about your current state.”

“……right.”

Konoe replied honestly. Somehow he seemed to be self-conscious.
Rai opened the door, and went out into the traffic.
He guessed it was around early evening.
The lights on the stalls were bright, and there were still a lot of cats walking around.

“Where are we going?”

“A little ways from here there’s a vacant lot……don’t wander off.”

Probably offended by the words he added on at the end, Konoe didn’t reply.
The vacant lot on the outskirts of town was a place he had swung his sword around many times.
It was dotted with several worn away building stones.
They were covered by overgrown grass.
In the center of that place, Rai faced Konoe.
The moon of shadows shone as the air had a silent chill.

“A Touga can’t compete without a Sanga. Therefore we need to stabilize that ability as soon as possible.”

Rai looked at the seemingly worried Konoe as he spoke quietly.

“Before that, there’s something I want to say.”

“What?”

Konoe’s lips pursed tightly while his eyes had traces of the light of the moon shining in them.

“I didn’t mention it earlier, but there are a lot of things I need to tell you.”

“Tell me.”

“…….if I tell you, you’ll abandon me.”

“Ooh?”

Rai quietly waited for Konoe to begin talking.

The cold night breeze shook the grass.

“My body, this curse is probably……something more complicated than we think. It was planned.”

Konoe lifted his face at that point.
But it seemed like he couldn’t face Rai.

“……I’m being tested.”

“By who?”

“I don’t know. By something unseen……but, it’s a huge existence. Something that could easily crush my life out with one hand. You may only want my power as a Sanga. But, something unforgivable other than that has awakened in me.”

Saying all that without pause, Konoe took a breath.

“So, if you intend on associating with me, you’ll have no choice but to be burdened by this too—so.”

Konoe’s gaze dropped once again as he looked lost.
He seemed unable to continue his words.

“Lift your face.”

Rai swung his tail as he spoke.
Konoe’s ears were lowered slightly as if he were afraid.

“I said it before. Things like curses are nothing to fret about. The size of it doesn’t matter. Why would I be afraid of that sort of thing now? Everything has already started, hasn’t it?”

Konoe nodded slightly.

“Then don’t look back. Otherwise, you’ll trip, and you’ll die. The moment I decided to raise you as a Sanga, I started to walk down the path you should be going forward on. ……all right?”

Rai quietly approached Konoe.

“If you have time to think about unnecessary things, then look forward. Your true enemy isn’t your curse, that huge existence, or even your own tragic fate. It’s yourself when you’ve lost your way. If you don’t want to lose, then be strong.”

Konoe looked straight at him.

“If you get it, let’s begin. I’ll listen to the rest of your story when we return to the inn.”

Rai turned away from Konoe and put some distance between them.
Once he faced Konoe again, the confusion in his eyes had disappeared.
That was good.
If he were confused, he wouldn’t be able to sing.
Rai crossed his arms, looking at Konoe as he spoke.

“There are many ways for a Sanga to learn a song, but I’ve heard that a Sanga always has their own song.”

“Their own song?”

Konoe asked back.
Somehow, since Konoe didn’t even know he was a Sanga, he seemed not to know much about Sangas in general.

“Perhaps you’ll naturally master being a Sanga on your own. But first, let’s try to awaken your song.”

“How?”

Rai spoke as if to expel Konoe’s doubts.

“Remember clearly the circumstances surrounding the moment your song manifested.”

Konoe closed his eyes at his words.
He inhaled deeply as if he were trying to adjust his breathing, then exhaled.
Konoe’s breathing became quiet and relaxed.
His slightly lowered ears conveyed his concentration as they faced

outwards.
As Rai watched Konoe closely he turned his ears toward his breathing.
His steady breathing became slightly disheveled.
Konoe knit his brows.

"…….no good."

Konoe opened his eyes.
His forehead was imbued with sweat and his breathing quickened.
His eyes started to squint.

"Don't rush it."

Konoe's eyes narrowed at Rai's words.

"You weren't able to feel anything?"

"No……"

Konoe shook his head a bit as if he were unsure.

"Even if you only feel something small, try to chase after that feeling next time."

He didn't believe the song of a Sanga was that easily obtained.
Konoe once again closed his eyes.
As he slowly started to inhale and exhale, Konoe entered his own world.
His quiet breathing became rough, then changed to labored.
He wondered what was in the depths of Konoe's song.

"……kh, ngh……"

Konoe's body wavered. It was damp with sweat and full of suffering.
Was he really taking it that far—that's when Rai felt it, and heard a faint song.
His body was illuminated with a small light, it had a warm feeling.
That was strength.
The small song became glimmering particles pouring into Rai's body, bestowing him with strength.

He instinctively looked at his hand glowing with light.
When the light emitted stronger, he felt his body overflowing with strength.
But, with a small sound like something bursting, it suddenly disappeared.
All that remained was the sound of the wind through the grass.
Konoe watched him closely, his forehead still imbued with sweat.
Rai clenched the hand he was looking at then spoke.

"When you closed your eyes, I started to hear a song. It was only for a moment, but when the song flowed into me, I felt myself fill with strength."

"……it was successful then?"

"So it would seem."

The moment he answered, Konoe's knees gave out.
He reflexively put out his arms. He caught Konoe in his arms, his body was burning hot.
Konoe's eyes had dimmed a little, but immediately changed into a vigilant color.

"……I'm fine, let go."

Konoe twisted his body to wriggle away.
Rai spoke when he suddenly remembered something he had not told Konoe about Tougas and Sangas.

"The deeper the trust between a Touga and Sanga, the higher the ability. If their hearts aren't united, then no matter how high their own individual abilities are, it would be meaningless."

Was he really able to accomplish a relationship with Konoe to that extent?

"……it's like a bond."

He muttered his words mixed with a sardonic smile.
He didn't know if he was able to accomplish that sort of relationship with anyone.

“Are you trying to say I’m impossible as a partner or something?”

Konoe spat his words out as he struggled in Rai’s arms.

“Not you. I’m talking about myself.”

Konoe furrowed his brow at the truth he let slip.
Rai let go of Konoe and turned away.
For just a moment he felt heat in the depths of his right eye.
It seemed like that heat was telling him there was no way he’d be able to fight together with someone.
Be strong—were the words he had told Konoe himself.
Rai turned around and looked at Konoe.

“If you don’t have any problems with that, then that’s enough for today. Next will be sword practice.”

“Sword?”

Konoe asked back surprised.

“Just because you’re a Sanga doesn’t mean you don’t need a sword. If you want to fight, you need to raise your skills.”

Rai said with his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“What was the song like from earlier?”

Rai stopped his movements at his question.

“Your song?”

“Yes.”

His words made him remember the faint sound of Konoe’s song.

“I didn’t feel particularly different. It bestowed strength to the Touga, but it was a pretty basic song.”

“……I see.”

Konoe’s voice sunk.

“Basics are essential. Without any special qualities it’s easy to use. Besides, from now on, your songs will only increase. It’d be problematic if they didn’t. You did well for your first time.”

Konoe looked at him in surprise.

“What? If you don’t have any more questions, let’s begin.”

Rai pulled out his sword and readied it.
Konoe also pulled out his sword.

“Come.”

At almost the same time he spoke, Konoe brandished his sword as he ran toward him.
His impression of him barely changed from the first time.
Konoe’s sword skill was at least fast.
Their swords collided.
His sword was light.
Since Konoe was a smaller species and Rai was a larger one, it was obvious that their sword movements would be different, but he wanted his blows to be a little heavier. Either that, or for his attacks to hit vital spots fast enough.
It’d probably be best for Konoe to aim for vital spots.

“Watch your opponent carefully.”

“Got it.”

First, he needed to start observing his opponent properly.
Konoe’s fur stood on end.

“Don’t get so worked up. Always make your moves calmly.”

“……right.”

Konoe once again attacked. Rai easily brushed it off.
They had a long night.

The next day, gentle sunlight came in from the window. The Moon of Light shone brightly.
They had been sparring last night until late, so by the time they

returned to the inn, the Moon of Shadows had started to sink.
The Moon of Light and the Moon of Shadows.
The world had two shining moons.
The Moon of Light rose from the west and floated into the midday sky, the Moon of Shadows rose from the east, floating into the night sky.
As he watched Konoe groom his disheveled fur, Rai got dressed then immediately started to speak once he was done.

“We’re going to see a shaman.”

“Shaman……?”

Konoe asked back.

“There’s a rumor that a shaman with the power of foresight lives in the forest near Ransen. He seems to be considerably old with a knowledge proportionate to his age. He may know something about your situation.”

Konoe thought for a moment at his words, then opened his mouth.

“Do you know where that shaman is located?”

“Not exactly. All we can do is ask around and search the forest using intuition.”

Rai said as he buckled his coat. Konoe didn’t move as he seemed to be thinking about something.

“Hurry and get ready.”

“Yesterday, we were at a vacant lot, right? There was a forest opposite of the city around there. I think he may be there.”

His tail swung at his unexpected words.

“How do you know that?”

When asked, Konoe looked lost for a moment, then spoke.

“Last night, I heard a song when we were leaving the vacant lot.”

“A song?”

He remembered Konoe stopping on their way back to the inn yesterday.

“There was a minstrel cat that I see often, and then……he sung.”

Konoe closed his eyes, then opened his mouth and spoke with a faint melody.

“Those eyes see everything; they point towards the depths of the forest, to the wise man who lives in a shrine. Then the minstrel pointed toward the forest.”

“What happened to him afterwards?”

“I don’t know. When you spoke to me, he disappeared.”

He didn’t know if he could trust this so called minstrel so easily. Rai dropped his gaze and thought.
If that was where he was telling Konoe to aim for, there was a possibility it was a trap.

“I don’t believe it.”

He declared to which Konoe lifted his gaze, glaring daggers.

“But, I’ve seen him several times before. In Karou, even in Ransen.”

“Do you have proof that you can trust him?”

“That’s……”

Konoe dropped his gaze. After a brief moment, he once again looked straight at Rai.

“I don’t have any proof. But, I don’t think he’s my enemy. Based off my intuition.”

“Are you sure that’s not just what you hope for?”

“No.”

Rai looked down at Konoe who was still sitting on his bed.
Konoe glared back sharply.
He clenched his hands nervously.

Jeez—.

“Stubborn, aren’t you?”

Rai said sighing a bit, and Konoe let out a deep breath.

“Either way, we don’t know the location of the shaman, right?”

“Right.”

“Then it’s better than searching blindly.”

Konoe’s voice was certain.

“And if it’s a trap?”

“Then we’ll deal with it then. It’s not something we have to think about right now.”

His expression was completely different from last night at the vacant lot.
Rai spoke as if he were bored.

“You really will die young.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you.”

He was amused by those words.
He had never been amused like this by anyone’s words before—at least not since his childhood.
As if to conceal his sudden passing memories, Rai turned his face away from Konoe.

“Hurry up and get ready. Let’s go.”

He said still turned away from Konoe.
It’s all right.

It's still—all right.
I'm…all right.
The forest was dim, but not as much as the forest of the "void".
This forest had yet to be invaded by the "void".
"A shrine, huh?"
Rai said as he looked around the area.
"Yes."
Konoe answered.
He had been in this forest many times, but there was a cliff to the left covered in moss that extended through it, and he had never seen anything like a shrine there before.
The two of them went along on their guards without a word.
"Hey."
Rai spoke to Konoe.
Interrupting the cliff wall was a passageway. He wasn't sure how he could have missed this passage, but it was hidden by the grass around it that was almost as tall as himself.
"There's a path."
The two of them headed toward the passageway interrupting the cliff wall. The ground beneath their feet in the overgrowth was muddy.
They continued to go on ahead as they pushed their way through the grass that reached their faces, until they came across an opening that seemed to be carved into the cliff wall.
It was a shrine.
Rai's white tail vigilantly stood on end.
There was a pattern bordering the opening that seemed to have a barrier affixed to it.
"Here?"
Konoe nodded at Rai's question.
"I'm sure you know this, but be on your guard."
Rai stepped into the shrine with his hand on the hilt of his sword.
It was dark inside, but there was enough light coming in through the entrance to at least be able to survey the area.
It didn't have a menacing atmosphere.
Right, like that cave.
A cold chill ran down his spine.
Rai closed his eye for a moment and shook off that passing scene.
When he opened his eye, he saw a faint light.
It was a torch.

At the end of the passage there was something like an altar, and next to it a cat.
“Are you the shaman with the power of foresight?”
Rai spoke to that cat as he kept his guard up.
The cat facing the altar slowly turned around.
That cat had half of his face hidden by a mask with a pattern drawn on it. He was an iron blue cat.
“Ooh…… You know this place well.”
He wasn’t sure what age this cat was by his low composed voice. He didn’t look like he was much older than himself.
“There shouldn’t be many people who know of this place.”
The gray cat’s tail swayed nonchalantly as he observed Rai, then Konoe.
Rai glared back at the gray cat, his hand still on the hilt of his sword.
The cat had a mysterious aura.
“This is rather interesting. The stars last night predicted an unusual occurrence……I see, so it was this.”
A sparkle came across the gray cat’s eyes.
“Answer me. Are you the shaman?”
Rai asked without lowering his guard.
The gray cat wasn’t concerned at all, as his tail swayed casually and opened his mouth.
“What a curt male you are. Don’t be in such a hurry. If you’re that impatient you’ll never accomplish anything. Certainly, there are those in this world who call me such. I don’t really know.”
The gray cat’s—the shaman’s words annoyed him.
Even though he sensed no hostility from him, his round about way of speaking raised his suspicion.
The shaman’s gaze stopped on Konoe.
“Aren’t you especially pleasant. Very much so, my, my……”
“……do you know something?”
Konoe asked uneasily. When he did, the shaman smiled widely.
“I know everything. Fufufu.”
Konoe looked away and the shaman reached out toward his hood and took it off.
His black ears were exposed.
Reflexively, Konoe put his hand to his sword.
The shaman narrowed his eyes at Konoe.
A sharp light like a thin needle filled his narrowed eyes.

"……hm. I see. Well, there's more, right? Show me."
Konoe held out his tail, and took off his arm covers at the shaman's forceful demands.
"Ohoo."
The shaman grabbed Konoe's arm.
Rai watched him with his hand still on his hilt.
"Without a doubt, these are the manifestations of the old legendary curse."
The shaman said as he nodded, then lifted his face.
"So, why did you come all the way here for?"
The shaman asked. Rai then opened his mouth.
"For a way to lift the curse."
"A way to lift the curse?"
The shaman asked back then started to chuckle as if there was something funny about that.
"That's a rather optimistic idea. A way to lift the curse? Interesting. Fufufu."
"Is there a way?"
Rai asked again.
"I don't know. I don't know if it's even possible to lift in the first place."
"Then you're saying we came here for nothing?"
He said as if to corner the shaman who finally looked at Rai.
"Didn't I say not to be so hasty? You really are an impatient male. Well, you two came here because you were worried about it, right?"
The shaman moved quickly, as if his calm demeanor up until now were a lie, and approached Konoe's face.
"I can see a large shadow behind you."
"……shadow?"
"That's right. It's an unbelievably strong power……It has your soul in its hand and is closing in around you like a cage. Do you know anything about that?"
Konoe's ears moved. He seemed to know something about it indeed.
Rai stared at Konoe.
"Why……me, for what purpose?"
Konoe was clearly unsettled.
That was understandable.
However, could that have been the "something more than we thought" Konoe spoke of last night.
"Well now. It's just, you seem to have been born under an unusual

star. Your future is covered in darkness."
The shaman narrowed his eyes at Konoe as if he were glaring at him.
"I can't see anything……no, more than can't, there's nothing to see. You have no future."
"……no future……?"
Konoe asked back as he shuddered at the shaman's words.
The shaman smiled calmly as he nodded at his question.
"I'm going to die?"
Konoe asked the shaman the same thing that crossed Rai's mind.
"Not necessarily. It all depends on you."
Konoe's body shook violently. He reflexively tried to put out his hand, but it barely made it to the altar to prevent himself from collapsing.
But—.
"……kh."
Konoe forcibly took his hand away from the altar as if he had touched something hot.
"……oho."
The shaman didn't hesitate to raise his amused voice.
"Did you see something?"
Konoe gasped at the shaman's words.
"Fufufu. How nice. Let me try and look a little more."
The shaman stood in front of Konoe and held out his hands. Konoe shook and pulled his body back in surprise.
"What? Your ears and tail are lowered. I'm not going to do anything bad. I'm just going to take a closer look. Even if I'm unable to help you lift the curse, you don't want this trip to be pointless."
The shaman glanced at Rai.
He was annoyed by his taunting tone.
Rai took out his sword and thrust it between Konoe and the shaman.
"What do you think you're doing?"
The shaman asked with a sharp light in his eyes.
"Is everything you've said true?"
"Why would I lie?"
The shaman asked, smiling as he tilted his head at Rai's words.
"You have no proof that we can believe you."
The shaman laughed at Rai's words. "In that case, what do you need to believe? Or maybe if only the majority gave their approval?"

The shaman traced his finger along Rai's sword.
That was similar to what he had told Konoe.
"Let me ask you the opposite. Where is the proof that you are you? Where is the proof that this reality is reality? What if all this time you've been curled up on the floor and have just been dreaming this whole time? The world may have already been destroyed by the invasion of the "void". However, even if this world was your dream, and you thought it was reality, then it would be."
The shaman spoke slowly without pause, then continued his words.
"……All right? Whatever it is you believe, or whatever reality is. It's your own decision. Not anyone else's."
The flame of the torch crackled.
Rai continued to confront the shaman without a word.
"……if you understand, sheath your sword."
Rai took his sword away at the shaman's words.
He had no intention of opposing what the shaman told him.
What the shaman had said was accurate.
But, for some reason—he felt uneasy.
The shaman may have been able to see the true nature of the heat in the depths of his right eye.
"Either way, it's your choice. Right?"
"I……"
Konoe was deciding on his words.
Rai continued to look away as he waited for Konoe to answer.
"……if you're able to see something, I'd like to know about it. I want you to tell me."
Konoe decided on his answer.
"Fufu, that's the spirit. If there's something important to you, you should attempt to hold onto it."
Smiling satisfied, he took both of Konoe's hands into his.
"Now, look into my eyes. Look very closely."
The shaman looked into Konoe's face.
"That's right……, closely, closely."
He couldn't tell if something was happening between the two of them. Just, he felt something unusual was controlling the shaman's body.
That scene made Rai tense.
"Hm."
"Did you see anything?"
"Four shadows."

“Four shadows……?”
The shaman firmly replied yes when Konoe questioned him.
“I saw four shadows surrounding your soul. They’re……not cats.”
Once he said that, the smile on the shaman’s face disappeared.
“They’re something completely different from cats. Spirits much more malicious and consisting of pure emotions. Perhaps……”
Konoe finished the shaman’s words.
“……devils, right?”
“……exactly.”
Rai furrowed his brows slightly at his reply.
“Are you saying there are four devils?”
Konoe asked in a hurry.
“Right now, that’s what it looks like. Four different colored powerful spirits are surrounding you. Devils clinging to one soul is pretty unusual. On top of that, four at once is practically unheard of. Your existence may be a somewhat unique one, but……just as I thought, there is something pulling the strings from behind. And once again, it is the doings of that large shadow that’s grasping your soul.”
The shaman said as he turned his gaze away from Konoe.
“What is it……?”
“That’s something I don’t even know.”
The shaman replied to Konoe’s muttered words.
Konoe’s gaze didn’t move as he trembled considerably.
“However, I didn’t see only bad things. There’s something divine protecting you as well.”
“Something divine?”
“Yes. It’s not very big, but it’s a soul with immense power. You’re quite popular, must be hard for you.”
The shaman laughed amused.
“Do the devils have something to do with the curse?”
“It doesn’t seem like I could say no to that.”
When asked, the shaman glanced at Rai.
“Do you know where their true forms are?”
“No way, are you thinking of fighting them?”
The shaman asked looking overly surprised.
“Since we don’t know anything else about that large shadow, we have no choice but to deal with what we do know about.”
“Are you serious?”
“Why would I lie?”

“You have knowledge of devils?”
“Of course, I know more than enough.”
The shaman covered his mouth as he laughed.
He was annoyed.
“……what’s so funny?”
“Fufu, fwahahaha. No, how wonderful. How interesting. Fwahaha, you’re rather reckless. Challenging devils like that. I like it.”
Finally seeming satisfied, the shaman finished laughing and held out his arm towards where Konoe and he had come in from.
“Once you leave this forest, there will be a small village. When you pass through that village you’ll enter a forest, if you go on to the center of it, there will be earth filled with four colored lights. That place is what I saw—but,”
The shaman looked at Rai for a moment then looked at Konoe.
“This curt male is a new friend of yours? He seems rather devoted.”
“No, he’s……”
Konoe started to shake his head, but Rai interrupted him.
“He’s a Sanga.”
“Ooh?”
The shaman’s eyes widened in surprise as he looked at Konoe with a smile.
“Fufufu. I see, a Sanga. You really were born under an unusual star.”
But Konoe looked away from the shaman seemingly in a daze.
He was probably getting himself down again.
Before he could say anything to him, the shaman spoke to Konoe.
“Don’t be so anxious. Your song will surely shake this world.”
Shake the world? What did he mean?
Konoe’s song—?
“Even so—“
The shaman turned to Rai. His eyes narrowed with traces of a cold light.
“Your overly cautious disposition……, ……I see.”
The shaman smiled widely.
“……you saw?”
Rai furrowed his brow as he vaguely felt what the shaman saw.
“I saw. Well, wherever there is light, there’s bound to be shadows as well. It’s the same for anyone.”
Rai reflexively glared at the shaman.
“Well, there’s nothing else I can tell you. If you’re going, then you

should hurry up and go."
The shaman sighed as he waved his hand nonchalantly.
That probably really was all he could tell them.
"Let's go."
Rai turned away from the shaman and started to walk away. They no longer had business in this place.
He heard Konoe behind him talking to the shaman for some reason.
"……what about money?"
"Money? Ooh, that's not necessary. I've lived in this shrine for quite some time. I have no need for money. Besides—"
The shaman's laughing voice echoed. Rai continued to wait for Konoe with his back turned.
"Honestly, I've been bored for so long. You showed me something fun. I'm the one who should thank you."
"……I see."
"From here on out, overwhelming chaos may befall you. You may also fall into dread. However, you certainly have something steadfast with you. Don't forget that."
Having a feeling those words were directed to him, Rai became annoyed again.
Something steadfast—was that something other than himself?
Was he really considered steadfast?
His current self had no idea.
Once their conversation had ended, he could tell by Konoe's gait that he was running after him.
Starting to walk away, Rai squinted his eyes at the light shining into the shrine from the entrance.
It was already starting to get dark, but being in such a dim place for some time, it was blinding.
He turned around to see Konoe doing the same.
After a brief moment of silence, Rai spoke to Konoe.
"We're going to the place the shaman spoke of."
"I thought you didn't trust him."
"We have no other leads."
"And if it's a trap?"
Konoe's words were the same as his own from before they had went to the shaman.
"We'll deal with it then. Isn't that what you said yourself?"
Konoe nodded at Rai's words. Then after thinking for a moment, he opened his mouth.

“We’re going now? From here?”
“Now. We have a clear goal, so going back to Ransen is just pointless. Besides, if someone came after us in the middle of the main street there, it would cause a scene. We shouldn’t be in the city.”
“Got it.”
Konoe nodded sincerely.
The forest at night was dark, even the ground beneath his feet was unclear. He had lit a torch, but Konoe was walking a little ways off behind him.
The light from the torch wouldn’t reach him from there, he thought, but even though he seemed to be walking with cautious steps, he decided not to say anything to him.
Konoe was probably rather tired from these past two days.
Yesterday they had escaped the forest of the “void”, at night they trained in order for him to sing his song, then from day break listened to what the shaman had to say, and now they would be traveling into the night.
As a bounty hunter, he was used to this sort of activity, but Konoe didn’t seem used to traveling at all.
Even though it was possible for him to go on, thinking of Konoe, he figured they should avoid going further.
“This is far enough for today.”
He told him without turning around, as he headed towards the grove of trees.
“Gather some firewood.”
“……all right.”
Konoe’s voice was low. Just as he thought, he must have been tired.
He threw the torch onto the collected firewood.
The fire flared up with vigor and lit the area.
He hadn’t heard any rumors of demons in this forest, but that didn’t mean there weren’t wild animals around.
The fire settled, and Rai sat down next to the campfire.
Konoe sat a little further away from it.
He had noticed Konoe’s strange behavior around the torch too.
It shouldn’t be the night he had a problem with.
The proof of that was when they were training in that vacant lot the other night.
Continuing to keep silent, he took off his equipment, and watched Konoe closely as he groomed himself.

Konoe also took off his equipment and started to groom.
However, whenever Konoe's eyes reflected the fire, uneasiness floated into them.
"You're afraid of fire, aren't you?"
His thoughts came out of his mouth. Konoe looked at him startled.
"……not really."
His tone gave away that he was clearly lying.
The evidence was his ears twitching uneasily.
"You were avoiding it when we were walking, right? Now too."
Konoe averted his gaze and got quiet as he continued his words.
"Well, it's not like I care either way."
Konoe seemed to be pouting as he wrapped his arms around his knees.
Being afraid of fire was naturally not that unusual.
When he looked at Konoe's sulking averted gaze, Rai took out some dried fruit reserves from the bag he had been carrying on his back.
It was dried fruit he carried with him for his travels.
"Are you hungry?"
"Not really."
He had to be hungry.
He tossed a fruit toward Konoe.
Rai started to bite into his own fruit as Konoe frantically caught it.
Konoe toyed with the fruit in his hands as if he were stalling, but after a while started to take some bites.
At that moment, the forest stirred.
He felt a presence of some sort.
With his hand on the hilt of his sword, Rai stood up, his ears standing straight.
Whatever it was, it was emitting a violent blood lust toward them.
He felt a faint heat in the depths of his right eye.
Was it an animal—no, it was a cat.
Konoe, also noticing the presence, grabbed his sword as his fur stood on end.
The forest once again shook violently.
A black figure jumped out from the thicket, then swung its sword down at Rai.
"……kh!"
Sparks flew.
His hands that intercepted that blow were shaking from the shock.
In front of him was a black cat. He was glaring at him as he let out

a growl.
“Asato……!?”
Konoe yelled at the black cat. The black cat’s ears twitched and without losing a moment, Rai repelled the sword and jumped back. However, the black cat immediately recovered and once again swung his sword down at Rai.
“Stop!”
Konoe yelled. The black cat stopped his movements.
At almost the same time, Rai had knocked the black cat’s sword away.
He hadn’t been conscious of his movements until then.
If faced with blood thirst, he reacted reflexively.
“……Asato. Asato, right……?”
The black cat turned toward Konoe.
“…….why?”
Rai turned the tip of his sword toward the black cat who seemed like he was trying to say something.
“Who is this guy? An acquaintance of yours?”
Konoe nodded.
“So your acquaintance is a stupid cat that goes around attacking random people without a second thought?”
He asked, but Konoe’s acquaintance—the cat he called Asato, looked right at Konoe as if no one existed in his sight but him.
Rai sheathed his sword, leaned against a nearby tree, and watched the two of them.
He didn’t have much interest in their conversation.
Asato’s skin was brown, his hair, his ears and tail were all black. He saw he had black markings on his arm, but they were probably drawn on.
Perhaps Asato was a Kira cat.
There were a lot of cats in Kira with brown skin, with black ears and tails that had markings like the cursed appearance.
They hated to be seen by the public, and were an aggressive species which was applicable to Asato.
Kira was a village deep inside a place called the “Yuukoku Valley”.
The Yuukoku Valley had not been invaded by the “void”, but there are fumes from an unknown source rising from the ground, the plants are withered, and the water spoiled; it was a valley where few living things could go near.
Since he had become a bounty hunter, he had only stepped foot into

that place once, but he hadn't come across anyone from Kira.
Asato's body shook then collapsed. He seemed to be wounded somehow. He couldn't have been wounded by him. Konoe frantically helped him up and started to attend to him.
"You intend on helping him?"
He spoke from behind them as Konoe boldly assisted him.
"Of course."
"You can't trust him. Leave him."
Asato turned his angry gaze toward Rai who was staring at him.
Rai was used to obvious hostility directed towards him, but he felt something more from Asato's gaze.
It was a discontent different from irritability.
"He helped me out once. Besides, the only reason he attacked was because he was wounded. He was probably being chased after by someone……"
"He wouldn't hesitate to kill. That's what those eyes tell me."
Rai interrupted Konoe's words.
"Yeah, but……!"
Konoe yelled, but afterwards pursed his lips tightly as if to hold back the rest of his words.
Konoe's eyes glared at Rai sharply.
"……whatever. No matter what you say, I'm going to help him. If you want to go, then you can go by yourself."
Konoe said then once again started to attend to Asato.
"……stupid cats, all of you."
Rai sighed his words as he turned away from Konoe.
Konoe didn't even look at him but Asato bared his fangs and let out a growl towards him as he grimaced from his wound.
"You stop too, Asato."
Konoe stopped Asato.
"……why?"
"Why……?"
"He's an enemy, isn't he?"
Asato asserted.
"No. He's not an enemy."
Konoe told Asato quietly.
"He didn't force Konoe to come with him?"
"……no."
"You're just a complete idiot, aren't you?"
Rai muttered his words at Asato who once again growled at him.

“Stop it. You calm down too, Asato. Did something happen?”
Konoe asked, but Asato didn’t say a word.
“……would you like anything, water, food?”
“……I’m fine.”
“Asato……can no longer return to his village, huh.”
He got a bad feeling when he heard Konoe mutter that.
About the words Konoe were going to say when he turned towards him—.
“……we’re taking Asato with us too.”
Just as he predicted.
“Asato can no longer return to his village. Same as me. Besides, his skills are at least on par with yours.”
“……they better be.”
He replied, looking at Asato. When he noticed his gaze, Asato growled.
He certainly was skilled. That blow was considerably heavy.
But, he just couldn’t stomach it.
“……I feel something bad from you……just what are you?”
Asato muttered as his pupils narrowed to points, and turned his hostility toward him.
“I don’t want to hear that from a stupid cat.”
“……I’ll kill you.”
Konoe held back Asato’s riled up body.
No matter how skilled they were, cats that easily let the blood go to their head weren’t on the same level as him.
Rai turned his eyes away from Asato’s gaze and spoke.
“Do what you want. I’ll keep watch until dawn. Since now we need to make sure the ones chasing after that stupid cat don’t attack us.”
Rai told Konoe as he lifted himself up the tree he was leaning against.
He had his fill of stupid cats.
From the top of the tree he could see the Moon of Shadows illuminating the forest.
Below, he could see Konoe and Asato around the campfire talking about who knows what.
He had no interest in the details of their conversation.
But he was curious as to why Konoe was that concerned about Asato.
He asked about his curse, but he hadn’t asked much about what happened to him before arriving at Ransen.

Could he have met Asato during that time?
It was natural that both of them didn't know things about each other. There were a mountain of things he hadn't told Konoe about himself.
Rai looked up at the Moon of Shadows.
Suddenly, he felt a discomforting presence appear that made the hair all over his body stand on end.
What *was* that?
He climbed down the tree in a hurry.
Konoe and Asato were both on their guard with the fur on their ears and tail on end.
But he couldn't see anyone.
"Over here."
A high pitched voice echoed mysteriously through the forest.
A shadow of a person floated behind Konoe.
That wasn't a metaphor. A white haired figure wrapped in red clown-like clothes, was floating in midair.
It wasn't a cat. The proof being his lack of ears and his lizard-like tail. On top of that, his eyes were red.
The clown put his hands on his hips, then put one hand on his chest and bowed his head.
"You……"
Somehow, it seemed like Konoe knew this clown.
"Oh, your friends have increased. Is it comforting? Are they reliable? How nice."
Konoe jumped with immense force at the clown.
"……oop!"
The clown smoothly dodged Konoe's claws and giggled.
Konoe's pupils narrowed to needle-like points as he let out an intimidating growl.
"Ooh, scary. Don't get so upset. I didn't come here to fight."
As if he had grown wings, the clown landed on the ground on the tips of his toes, laughing.
"Konoe, don't."
Asato stopped Konoe who had tried to jump at him.
Rai pulled out his long sword swiftly.
"That's right. I haven't done anything to get you so worked up. I don't have time to just casually go up against you guys."
"……what do you want?"
Konoe's voice trembled slightly.

“You’ve been dealing with quite a few things, huh. You even came all the way to this forest to listen to that old cat.”
Could it be he had been watching them?
Rai held onto his sword tighter.
“What are your intentions?”
Rai said jerking his chin forward as he readied his sword.
“You……, you have an evil aura.”
Asato added, lowering his body, growling.
“What’s that about? I haven’t even done anything yet.”
The clown said pouting, then giggled.
“You have something to do with Konoe’s suffering, don’t you?”
“How cruel. Are you saying it’s all my fault? I could just cry, really.”
The clown purposefully made a sad face at Asato’s words. However, that expression immediately changed into a smile.
“You know, I was just here to kindly show you guys the way. So instead, you should be thanking me, jeez.”
“Who do you work for?”
Rai asked the clown lowly.
“You want to know? You probably want to know. Fine. Well then, I’ll tell you everything. So why don’t you shut up and listen to what I have to say.”
The clown pointed to the forest.
“You were going to head that way, right? Go ahead. Soon something good will be right in front of your face.”
“……something good?”
Asato asked back.
“That’s right. But I’m not going to give you the details. If I told you, it’d be way too boring. Right?”
The clown smiled widely turning to Asato. Asato turned his hostility towards him, the hair all over his body standing on end.
“Aah, don’t scare me like that. Anyway. Go on ahead.”
He didn’t believe what the clown had said was the truth.
Rai pointed his sword at the clown and spoke.
“It’s a trap.”
“Who knows? It’s up to you guys whether or not to believe me. Besides, this may be the last time you guys get any pity. From me.”
The clown kicked off the ground. His body floated lightly into the air. The clown held out his hand toward the Moon of Shadows.
“Leaks-sama can’t wait to meet you. That’s why you should hurry

up and go.”
“……Leaks?”
Konoe repeated that name back.
Leaks—he had heard that name before.
“Fufu.”
“……wait!”
Asato tried to go after him, but the clown glided into the air, backing up one step at a time.
In order to evade Asato’s leap, the clown somersaulted and disappeared into the darkness.
“……he got away.”
Asato muttered with a groan.
Konoe watched the spot where the clown had disappeared in a daze.
“……Leaks?”
“Leaks, huh.”
Rai said from behind Konoe. Konoe turned toward him hastily.
“You know him?”
“The infamous sorcerer, right?”
Rai answered, looking into the darkness the clown had disappeared into.
“I’ve also heard about him from the elder. He’s called the sorcerer born from darkness.”
Asato continued.
Leaks was the name of the cat from Shisa’s old myths. He was the legendary sorcerer said to have been living in hiding in the forest since long ago.
His power was immense, but at some point, there wasn’t anyone who knew if he even existed.
“If that’s the identity of the one pulling the strings that the shaman spoke of, it’s going to be a problem.”
Rai furrowed his brows as he sheathed his sword.
“He’s an ancient soul that makes use of forbidden sorcery…who can also summon devils. It’s said that he’s exceptionally ruthless and cold blooded, and that he has lived overwhelmingly long. Hating contact with others, he keeps himself out of sight.”
“……Leaks, really exists?”
Konoe asked Rai, but it seemed to be said more to himself.
He didn’t seem to be unfamiliar with that name.
Just, he had thought it was nothing more than a legend or fairy tale

—that was what Konoe's tone conveyed.
"So it seems. But, it's all wrapped in mystery, what his face looks like, or where he is, no one knows. Even now……"
Rai cut his words there, and looked up at the sky.
Getting bits and pieces of details from bodyguards and informants, Rai was more familiar with the rumors of Shisa than Konoe or Asato.
"There's a rumor that even the phenomenon of the "void" devouring the world was all Leaks's doing."
"The "void"……?"
Konoe muttered in disbelief.
"About what that clown said earlier."
Rai looked in the direction where the clown had disappeared then opened his mouth.
"There's certainly a trap ahead."
"It doesn't matter if it's a trap or whatever."
Konoe said clearly as he stared into the darkness.
"Desperate, aren't you?"
Konoe turned his resolved gaze toward Rai when questioned.
"No. We can't just runaway now. So we need to drive forward and crush him."
"Leaks?"
Crushing a legendary sorcerer *would* be something to brag about.
"Leaks is Konoe's enemy?"
Asato who had been quiet opened his mouth.
"That curse too, is Leaks's doing?"
"……probably."
When Konoe answered, Asato started to strike his claws into a tree near him in unrestrained movements.
"I'll kill him. I'll never forgive the one making Konoe suffer, no matter what sort of cat he is."
Rai spoke as he let out a heavy sigh.
"He's well trained, isn't he?"
"……it's not like that."
Konoe replied to the irritated words that struck him.
"How'd you like to become an animal trainer or something?"
"……it's just one thing after another with you."
Konoe replied as he looked at Rai with furrowed brows.
"Hmph. So the one pulling the strings behind those four devils is Leaks, huh. Interesting."

Rai scoffed with a smile as he looked up at the sky.
A sorcerer and devils with malicious power that could dominate this world.
They were undoubtedly enemies he had never encountered before.
“As long as it’s someone else’s problem, huh?”
Konoe said annoyed.
“As long as it’s someone else’s problem.”
“I don’t think this is just someone else’s problem.”
When Rai answered him, Asato immediately interjected.
He wondered why Asato thought of Konoe’s problems as his own.
He was a peculiar cat.
“Stupid cat.”
Asato crouched down at the words he threw at him.
“……I’ll kill you.”
“……enough!”
Konoe stopped the both of them with a sigh.
Then he spoke.
“Let’s go on ahead.”
“Now?”
Asato asked back.
“It’s not like I can sleep, so we should hurry on ahead.”
“Exactly.”
Rai agreed with Konoe, then lit a torch in the campfire.
“Is your wound all right, Asato?”
“It’s nothing to worry about.”
Konoe was concerned about Asato.
“Don’t drag us down.”
“Same to you.”
Asato bared his fangs at Rai’s words once again.
The three of them then began to go through the forest together.

Lamento Beyond the Void Expiatio (Tomoko Kanemaki/N＋C) Chapter 3

Caput 3

After walking for a while, the forest suddenly opened up, and building-like forms appeared. He wondered if this was the “something good” that the clown spoke of. The village illuminated in the moonlight didn’t look all that strange. Konoe had stopped and he could tell from his tail that he was nervous.

“Let’s go.”

“Got it.”

Konoe’s tail drooped at the words directed at him. He had opened himself up to anxiety. Completely opposite of that was Asato who didn’t appear to be nervous at all. The village lit by torches seemed deserted. Almost all of the doors of the homes appeared to be shut tight. Of course, ever since the “void” had started to ravage the world, it was unusual to find a village that wasn’t deserted. The smell of cats coming from the small homes lined up on the street grazed his nose. He felt the presence of cats living behind those doors. It seemed like it wasn’t completely deserted.Suddenly feeling a presence, Rai put his hand on his long sword and turned around.

“Hee!”

A cat with a torch and a small axe fell on his rear.

“H-Help! Don’t kill me!”

Rai decided not to draw his sword at the screaming voice.The cat looked very much like a normal village cat.

“Sorry. We didn’t mean to startle you.”

Konoe held out his hand, the cat obediently grabbed his hand and stood up.

“W-What did you guys come here for? What business do you have with this village?”

The village cat asked in a shrill voice.

“……we’re just passing through.”

“Passing through this village, for what?”

The village cat immediately asked, axe in hand.

“We don’t have business with this village. We’re headed for the forest past this village.”

“Ah, ooh……could it be that you all are just traveling cats?”

The village cat watched them closely as Konoe explained, then eventually relaxed his grip on the axe he was holding.

“Well then……It’s just, it’s been dangerous here. Bandits constantly come through this area, so I was certain that’s what you all were……sorry.”

The village cat explained, seemingly relieved. It was certainly natural for them to be wary of visitors to their village during this time. Rai also sheathed his sword and looked at the village cat.

“You want to go to the forest across from here?”

The village cat jerked his chin toward the deep overgrowth across from them.

“Do you know about the earth filled with four colored lights?”

The village cat nodded at Rai’s words.

“Ooh, you want to go there? Of course I know it. There aren’t many cats around here that *don’t* know it. Once you go through the

depths of the forest there will be a slightly open area. There will be four stones, but their surfaces are smooth like a mirror, so when light hits them they each reflect four different colors. Well, for some reason the reflected lights all overlap in the center of that spot. No one knows why it was set up that way. It's a mysterious place. But……"

As if it was difficult to say, the village cat got quiet to choose his words. But, since they knew the location, there was no need for any further explanation.

"Let's go."

"H-Hey."

Rai started to walk away, but the village cat held him back.

"What an impatient guy, listen to the end please. There's no point in going now."

"What do you mean?"

Konoe asked the village cat.

"You won't be able to see the reflections without the Moon of Light. You won't be able to see them with the Moon of Shadows."

He looked up at the Moon of Shadows as he spoke. It was setting, but dawn was still far off.

"What should we do?"

"We have no choice but to wait for dawn."

He answered Konoe's question as he looked around. He was looking for a place they could camp out—.

"Why don't you spend the night in one of the empty homes?"

He turned his gaze to the village cat when he spoke.

"Ah, it's just……as you can see, this village is declining. A lot of

them have moved to Ransen. A city with an abundance of food would be better than this little place. Thanks to that, there has been a decrease in cats in this village. That's why if you guys stay the night, no one would really complain."

The village cat's words didn't seem to be a lie.

"You won't go to Ransen?"

The village cat shook his head at Konoe's words.

"I wanted to leave, but moving to Ransen isn't free. Plus I have various pointless memories here. Well, I guess I like this village for whatever reason."

He liked the village where he was born and raised, huh?
Since Rai felt no attachment to his hometown of Setsura, he couldn't really understand how he felt.

"Let's stay the night."

Asato nodded at Konoe's words, then glanced over at Rai for affirmation. He didn't have any particular reason to oppose.

"Well then, I'll show you guys to a home that all of you could stay in. This way."

The village cat started to walk down the dark path. However, he was a bit worried about this fortunate encounter that occurred.

"It'd be nice if nothing happens."

Konoe's ears twitched at his muttered words.

The village cat led them to a rather ordinary residence. He said it was an empty home, and he felt no malicious presences in it. It even had proper beds. Rai curled up under the window to keep an eye on the outside. It was possible that clown would come again. Konoe curled up in a large bed as Asato did so in the corner of the room. Rai felt uneasiness in his chest. He had a bad feeling. But in order to escape the trap that clown set, he needed to make sure he was calm. Rai closed his eyes and dozed off. He was used to

sleeping while remaining alert to surrounding presences. Suddenly he heard a small sound from somewhere. It was an unsettling sound of irregular tapping. He opened his eye and looked around the home. Konoe and Asato also seemed to notice the sound. The noise was coming from the door. Someone was knocking.

"……did something happen?"

Overlapping Konoe's voice was a sound like something wet hitting against something else. It was coming from the window. There was a hand clinging to it. It wasn't knocking, it was a palm eerily clinging tightly to the window. At almost the same time, the knocking sound got louder. The door shouldn't be locked. But it sounded like the one doing it was unable to open the door. He didn't know why.

"……they're coming."

At almost the same time as Rai's mutter, there was a sharp noise of the door opening. A cat stood there. It appeared to be the cat they met last night. He heard a groan coming from his mouth. His arms and tail were dangling aimlessly, and his eyes were facing upward.Those eyes were pointing towards—

"……what's going on?"

Konoe muttered dumbfounded.

"He's already dead."

Asato replied.

"But, he's moving."

"His corpse has been revived."

Konoe's eyes widened in shock at Asato's reply.

"His corpse? Is that possible?"

"It's a spell."

Rai answered as he drew his short sword.

“A manipulation spell. This is probably what that clown was talking about.”

He readied his short sword to throw at the village cat. At that moment, he heard a song from somewhere. It was a faint melody—it was a song completely different from Konoe’s and it put his nerves on edge. The village cat lifted his face with the song. He bared his fangs and charged. This song was controlling his corpse? Without a second thought, Rai pierced his sword into the village cat. His sword cut his thigh, and the village cat fell forward. His movements were sluggish. Rai withdrew his long sword then swung it down at the village cat.

“Stop!!”

He heard Konoe yell.

“It’s too late. He’s already dead.”

Rai replied, turning to Konoe.

“No, that’s not it. He’s just, being manipulated…….”

“In that case, what do you intend on doing with them?”

Rai pointed the tip of his sword toward the door. Konoe gulped. There he saw a scene of several cats walking towards them. All of the cats had drooping limbs and eyes facing upwards. Perhaps, all of those cats were already dead.

“This was Leaks—“

Konoe muttered.

“This is what Firi was talking about, isn’t it……?”

Firi—that was the first he heard that name, but it was probably that clown.
Agitated, Konoe’s tail trembled.

“Konoe……”

“Why. What did they ever do, why……”

Konoe now seemed as if he was going to collapse as he rushed to Asato uneasily.

“This has nothing to do with good or evil.”

Rai struck his words at Konoe.

“The strong will survive, the weak will be eliminated. That’s reality.”

Rai stepped on the cat moving slightly at his feet.

“Then the strong can just do whatever they want……!?”

Konoe yelled.

“Exactly.”

When Rai answered, he thrust his sword down into the cat beneath him. He felt Konoe look away.

“Sleep.”

He took out the sword that was momentarily buried into the cat’s body, then dropped it straight toward his forehead. The tip of his sword went in right between his brows as blood gushed out from his split head. Muddy blood sullied the bottom of his feet.

“If this is Leaks’s trap, then no one other than him will know what his aim was. But for those with power, those without power are just toys for their amusement. Of course, that includes us.”

Rai received Konoe’s challenging gaze as he pulled out his sword from the cat’s corpse and shook the blood dripping from it off.

“Konoe, if we don’t kill them then we’ll be killed.”

Asato said.

“Words and feelings aren’t weapons. They can’t protect you. I decided I wouldn’t give up not wanting to kill you. Because of that, I fight.”

Rai watched them closely.

“The dead cannot be revived. That’s what I was told by the elder.”

Konoe stared at the crumbled corpse at Rai’s feet as he listened to Asato’s words. This was probably unforgivable to Konoe. The deaths of cats that had nothing to do with him. To Rai, anyone but himself was unimportant. It didn’t concern him if they lived or died. It was the same for Leaks who considered them as nothing more than toys for his amusement. However—it was slightly different now. Since he had decided to raise Konoe as a Sanga and pair up with him—he wasn’t so sure.

“……Leaks……!”

Konoe stood up with his sword in hand and rushed out of the house. Rai and Asato followed after him.They could still hear a faint song coming from somewhere.

“This song……”

“It’s probably……”

Konoe muttered, but when Rai tried to answer, the cats jumped at them.

“We’ll talk later. There’s not that many of them. If we each take some, it’ll be over in no time.”

Rai said as he ran off. At this rate, if they didn’t bring down these village cats, they’d probably never rest in peace. He beheaded the cats that came at him one by one. If he only wounded these cats that were already dead, they wouldn’t stop moving.
His blade was becoming slippery with the blood of the cats. It was becoming less efficient taking down the unresponsive cats; it was discomforting. In the corner of his eye, he saw Konoe’s form now gripping his sword looking as if he were going to collapse. When he

tried to rush up to him, thinking he was wounded, Asato grabbed Konoe's shoulders before him.

"Are you all right, Konoe?"

"Yeah."

When he answered, Konoe's face was pale, though it may have just been because of the moonlight shining on it.

"This is surely a picture of hell."

Rai sighed as he looked around him.
He no longer felt the presence of cats.
Day was starting to break.

"The song… it disappeared."

Konoe muttered.That unpleasant song had certainly disappeared.

"That song was most likely controlling them."

Rai said as he wiped the blood off his sword.

"Who was singing?"

Konoe asked nervously.

"Perhaps, Leaks. He's either a Sanga, or possesses abilities on par with one. Even so, that didn't seem like much resistance."

Rai said as he looked at the pile of corpses they had cut down.

"We were completely played with."

If he had really intended on defeating them, he probably would have done something more direct with his own hands. The corpses of the cats didn't put up much resistance. He was just using dead bodies to toy with them, it was like he was making fun of them.
He felt Konoe's presence shake all of a sudden.

"Stop, Konoe!"

Asato grasped Konoe's shoulders.

"I felt a terrible presence. Are you all right?"

"……what's sleeping in you?"

Asato asked Konoe.

"What's inside of you?"

Those were mysterious words.The words Asato had thrown at him the night they had first met suddenly crossed his mind.

I feel something bad from you……just what are you?

Asato may have been aware of the "thing" inside of him. Even now, Asato was able to sense whatever that "something" was inside of Konoe.

"What, what do you mean……?"

Konoe grasped Asato's shoulders.

"What do you sense? What's inside me, Asato?"

When Konoe looked at Asato with pleading eyes, Rai felt something strange happening. He saw the pile of corpses shining in the moon of light, then they vaguely started to fade.

"Hey."

Konoe and Asato turned toward him when spoken to.

"Look."

The pile of corpses in front of the three of them started to gradually become faint, then they disappeared. Even the traces of blood on their own bodies had disappeared as if they were never there. Suddenly, Konoe grabbed his head and fell to his knees.

"What's wrong, hey……!?"

Konoe started to cough violently as if he were going to throw up.

At the same moment he felt clear hostility, Rai looked up at the sky. He saw something like a hole in the air.
No, it wasn't a hole. It was something warped. The sky warped and appeared to form something. Rai readied his sword.
With a drop, a black mass fell from the hole as a form spread in the empty space, and became the shape of a cat.

"I thoroughly enjoyed the show."

It was a quiet voice. But, it was a voice harmful to his ears, Rai thought.
The cat whose body was hidden by a black hood, floated down slowly from midair to the ground.
"It was a little unsatisfying. Though it's difficult to measure."

The shadow laughed.

"Alley-oop."

They heard a familiar high pitched voice as the sky warped once again. There, appeared a clown—Firi.

"I'm a little late. Sorry, Leaks-sama."

"……Leaks……?"

The cat standing next to Firi— was the sorcerer of darkness, Leaks.

"……I didn't think you'd actually show up yourself."

Rai turned the tip of his sword towards Leaks.

"I intended to reward you. As promised, you all amused me. That's right, that's not something that happens often in my lifetime."

Leaks laughed. Firi clapped his hands cheerfully, springing to his feet.

"That's great. That's great for you guys too. You pleased Leaks-sama."

“……why did you do those things?”

Konoe strained his words out as Asato propped him up.

“I told you, didn’t I? For entertainment. Though I suppose I should say to welcome and greet you all.”

“Welcome, and greet……?”

Konoe glared at Leaks.

“They were deprived, tasted ruin and loss, being killed must have certainly been agonizing.”

“……stop fooling around. What do you think these village cats felt as they died……”

Konoe clenched his fists. But Leaks merely chuckled beneath his breath.

“Leaks-sama bestowed his song onto you all. You guys should be happier.”

Firi said, smiling widely.

“So that song was yours.”

“I hope it was to your liking.”

Leaks replied to Rai’s words.

“You’re a Sanga?”

“Here!”

Firi raised his hand at Rai’s question.

“That would be me. I am Leaks-sama’s Sanga. But Leaks-sama can also produce his own song, and sing too.”

Firi stuck his chest out with pride and laughed haughtily.

“……it was an evil song.”

Konoe once again strained open his mouth to speak.

“A Sanga’s song empowers, but my song is to control. Manipulating the dead is simple. Especially those with strong lingering regrets.”

Leaks looked at Konoe.

“You feel them stronger than anyone else, don’t you? With the effects of your empathy.”

Konoe gasped.

“I know everything about you.”

“……what do you mean……kh.”

Konoe frowned.
Asato embraced him to hold him back as he glared at Leaks.

“You’re the one making Konoe suffer. His curse, and everything.”

“His suffering is regrettable, isn’t it? This is a test.”

Asato let out a growl at Leaks’s laughing voice.

“You hold the key yourself. Big changes are coming soon, I wonder if you’ll make it through them unscathed. It’s all up to you.”

Leaks said as he looked at Konoe.

“The earth filled with four colored lights. That’s where the door you should open is.”

That was all Leaks said before his body started to float up.

“Running away!?”

Rai slashed up at Leaks. It certainly should have hit him.
But, there was no response. The body that was split in two before him turned into black mist, then gathered into a sphere and floated in midair.

“Now is not the time.”

Leaks’s voice mixed with laughter resounded eerily from the sky.

“That’s too bad. See ya.”

Firi jumped up high and with a somersault disappeared.

“Wait!”

Rai ran off to chase after the floating spheres. He had a feeling he’d be able to chase after them for now.
The sphere was swallowed by the northern forest. He pushed his way through the grove and chased after its shadow.
This was a trap. Even though he knew that, he felt unrest in his chest.The depths of his right eye hurt.That guy—Leaks, he couldn’t let him escape. Feeling a strange presence behind him, Rai turned around.
It wasn’t Leaks, but he felt something sinister.
Rai turned his feet toward the thicket.
Konoe was there. Asato wasn’t.
Facing Konoe were two cats that appeared to be twins. They looked exactly the same aside from their hair color.
They were a pair?
There were several red lines running along one of the cat’s arms.
“…….Rai.”

Konoe called his name seemingly relieved.The pain in the depths of his eyes cooled and disappeared.
He wasn’t sure why.

“Let’s hurry and do this.”

“Let’s do this.”

The twin cats said overlapping their words.

“Can you sing?”

Rai asked Konoe as he glared at the twin cats.There’s no way he could compete with a pair without him.

“……I’ll try.”

Konoe said quietly, but certainly.
Konoe exhaled in order to steady his breathing. One of the twin cats put his claws to his own arm. Those claws made red wounds. Blood dripped from his arm, and the smell of it hit Rai’s nose.
He once again felt heat in the depths of his right eye. He then started to hear a heavy melody resound. The song turned into a green light, and flowed into the other cat.
A Sanga that sung with pain—.
A Sanga’s instrument, his voice and also their thoughts, weren’t the only thing used for songs.The cat before them was making a melody with the memory of the pain he felt. Sacrificing themselves was unsightly.
Completely opposite from that heavy melody, he heard a quiet, calming song.The song coming from Konoe’s body turned into an emitting light and poured into Rai who readied his sword.

“You’re a Sanga? That ominous cat, I had no idea. We won’t lose to you. Kil and I will never lose to you.”

The cat said as he wounded his own arm. Then the Touga he called Kil ran at them.
At the same time, Rai rushed toward him.
Their blades struck each other. The green light surrounding Kil was the wind.
That wind made Kil’s sword easily smash into his not giving him any openings. Similarly, a faint light wrapped around Rai’s body and he felt his body become lighter than usual.
Every time he thrust his sword cutting through the air, Kil also swiftly smashed his sword borrowing the power of the wind into his as he evaded him. Both of their songs and the sound of their swords overlapped, then accelerated.
Kil kicked off the ground and swung his sword down.
He repelled it with his short sword, and swung his long sword above Kil’s head. But Kil’s arm wrapped in arm covers intercepted it.
He evaded his attacks over and over again. He had no problem counter attacking his movements.
Every time his sword smashed into his, a sharp pain ran through his

right eye. That pain wasn't agonizing, instead it was comforting.

"Not bad, that Sanga of yours. He's not bad, even though he's a cursed cat. But, Ul won't lose."

Kil yelled smiling.
He guessed the cat singing was Ul.
Ul's arm was dyed red and dripping blood.
The melody had changed.

"I bestow bloody screams and resounding pain……to my beloved Sanga."

Ul cut into his flesh as if he were playing his arm as an instrument and sung. His expression was filled with pain.
Kil's movements instantly became faster, then his blade became surrounded by thorns of wind. The blade of a small gust of wind scratched Rai's cheek.Ul's song was overwhelming.
Konoe who only had his one song may not be able to compete.The moment that crossed his mind, Konoe's song changed.
It was a song he hadn't heard before.
A warm white flame-like light surrounded Rai. The light resided in his sword.This was strength. A song of power.
His sword struck the other—and light overflowed.

"Gwah……kh!"

He flung each of Kil's swords away from his body.Then, as he was in an unreasonable stance, he immediately inflicted another blow with his short sword. Kil's body struck the tree behind him then fell to the ground.

"……damn it!"

Taking out the life of the cat before his eyes was easy.
Ul screamed.

"Kil!"

Taking down the Touga, he could go after the Sanga—those words flashed through Rai's mind as he rushed toward him.Rai thrust his sword toward Ul.

Rai pierced his sword surrounded by light toward his most vulnerable vital area on his body.

“……gah……”

The black melody was cut off.
He saw himself reflected in Ul’s wide opened eyes.

His sword penetrated through his stomach, the tip of it peeking from his back. On the right side of his stomach, he saw his ribs underneath. Pierced like this, he didn’t look to be alive any longer. The pulse through his sword conveyed that. At the same time, the depths of his right eye ached.
Ul’s pierced body convulsed.
It wasn’t a fatal wound yet. A sword pierced through an opponent wouldn’t kill them. In order for this to be fatal, he needed to do one more move. Rai slowly pulled his sword out of his body. Blood spat out from both his wound and his mouth.

“……., ……Ul!!”

Kil ran to his other half who was already still.

“Ul, ……Ul, ……hey.”

Kil screamed as he held Ul’s body, still gushing blood.There was no reply.
He then no longer heard Konoe’s song.
Rai started to swing his sword from behind the currently defenseless Kil.

“Stop!!”

That was Konoe’s voice.
Rai slowly turned toward Konoe. He no longer felt the ache in his body from earlier.

“Why are you stopping me?”

He asked in a monotonous tone that even surprised himself.

“That’s enough. Without his Sanga, the Touga can no longer

fight.”

Konoe said with indignation.

“You’re going to let the enemy escape?”

In other words, they’ll regret it when they attack them again.

“If he’s unable to fight, it’s the same as admitting defeat.”

“Wouldn’t *that* be nice.”

The moment their glares met, the atmosphere became tense. Konoe’s gaze was firm.
At that moment, a black cat jumped out next to them.

“……Asato.”

Konoe muttered his name in surprise. While his and Konoe’s attention was on Asato, Kil picked up Ul’s body and leaped into the grove of trees.

“Is it okay?”

Asato asked unsure.
Asato, like himself, probably wouldn’t tell him to let the enemy escape.

“You’re a complete softie, you stupid cat.”

Rai sighed as he sheathed his sword.

Konoe was naïve. One day that naiveté will take his life.

“……you’re just indiscriminate.”

With Konoe’s words, the tense atmosphere relaxed a bit. Asato picked up the sword Kil left behind and looked at it closely. He then spoke.

“That cat just now……he really was a Meigi cat. I can tell by the smell.”

Meigi—he had heard that name before.They were an evil clan that worshiped devils. He had heard they were enemies of Kira.

“They’re devil fanatics, aren’t they? Why would they side with Leaks?”

“That’s an old story. I have no idea if the object of their worship has changed. But, lately their movements have changed a bit. They don’t come out of hiding other than to quarrel with Kira.”

He wondered if the four devils the shaman had spoken of and Leaks were connected somehow.
Asato looked at the grove Kil had disappeared into.

“……I have a bad feeling.”

Asato’s ears lowered. Konoe’s body shuddered. He crumbled to the ground as if he lost the strength in his knees.

“Konoe?”

Asato called out worried. Konoe’s face turned pale.
He wasn’t surprised.

“That must be the effects from invoking a new song.”

“……damn it, it’s just one thing after another……”

Konoe scoffed annoyed at Rai’s words and leaned against a nearby tree as he cursed to himself.
His body was probably in a lot of pain.

“When the melody changed, I felt strength overflowing from even my weapon.”

“……does that mean it was strong?”

Konoe asked lethargically.
He still didn’t seem to know for certain what sort of thing a Sanga’s song was.
Suddenly, something he knew about Sanga’s came to mind.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask Ransen’s Sanga leader about your songs.”

“Sanga leader?”

Konoe asked back.
He thought that was something every cat in Shisa knew about, but he guessed that wasn’t so. Were Karou cats all like this? He had a feeling that Konoe was the only one unfamiliar with it. Konoe was that cut off from the ways of the world.

“Every generation of Ransen lords choose a cat of a Sanga bloodline to protect them. Occasionally, they had influence over the country’s decisions. It’s a very important position.”

“Does a Sanga bloodline……really exist?”

“There are Sangas that with enough training can force their power. But compared to a genuine Sanga, they’re nothing. But no one really knows why genuine Sangas are born in the first place.”
Rai didn’t know what happened to the relatives of the genuine Sangas.

“Your song from earlier wasn’t bad to use.”

Rai spoke his honest thoughts as he wiped his blood-soaked sword then surveyed the area. Konoe couldn’t catch a break, so he probably couldn’t move very much. Today they’d camp out. He suddenly felt a gaze behind him and turned around. Konoe was looking at him with his mouth wide open like an idiot.

“What?”

“……ah, nothing.”

Konoe shook his head when asked. He was a guy that was difficult to understand.
He heard a low growl.

“And what’s wrong with you?”

He looked down at the one growling and saw Asato glaring back

at him.

“Nothing.”

“Then stop growling.”

“I’m not.”

Asato spat out his words, then suddenly started to sharpen his claws on the tree behind him.

“Jeez, I’m surrounded by stupid cats.”

Rai sighed as if he were bored. The smell of blood hanging over the forest had already faded.

“You can’t move any further tonight, right? Rest.“

Rai said to Konoe who was still on his knees looking somewhat dazed then looked up at the sky.
The Moon of Light was starting to fall.

Konoe and even Asato must have been tired.
As soon as the both of them laid down, he started to hear their sleeping breaths. Konoe was curled up a little away from the campfire. Asato was in a nearby tree’s root with his arms wrapped around his knees.
With the two of them in the corner of his eye, Rai also started to doze off. Generally, cats didn’t need to sleep very deeply. Especially if they were bounty hunters. But just as Konoe and Asato were tired, somehow even Rai was exhausted. The crackling sound of the fire became faint—the moment he thought about that, his vision was faintly covered in red. He knew—this dream.
He wasn’t asleep. It was a dream between sleep and being awake. Rai’s consciousness slowly receded into this warm slippery substance as always. He stuck his hands deep into this world of red.

“With a bloody roar, and the resonance of pain—“

It was a monotonous voice.
A bloody roar, and the resonance of pain?
He vaguely thought over that voice.

Pain took over his right eye.
A hand reached out and grabbed Rai's coat. That hand was—Ul's. Ul's arm was dyed red, as blood dripped from it.That arm before his eyes was instantly covered in scales.
The arm turned into a demon's tail that pierced Rai's body. It pierced him in the same way that Rai pierced Ul's body with his sword.
He could taste blood between his clenched teeth.
This was a dream.
Rai slowly awoke from his dream, opening his eyes slightly as he inspected the area. He could hear both Konoe and Asato's sleeping breaths. The Moon of Shadows was still high.
Rai once again closed his eyes. His vision was no longer red.

The next morning—after they had finished getting dressed and eating without any trouble, Rai and the others continued on north. The sky had cleared up. The forest had become unusually quiet. He didn't even hear birds chirping. Their vision closed in by greenery, suddenly opened.That grassy area surrounded by trees was full of lights. Each light had a trace of color. Red, blue, yellow and green.Those four colors overlapped and made several other colors.

"Is it……here……?"

Konoe muttered as he reflexively narrowed his eyes at the light.The lights were being emitted by four stones surrounding the grassy area. Their smooth surfaces reflected the Moon of Light.

"What a mysterious place……"

Asato muttered.

"The earth filled with four colored lights, so the door we should open is here, huh?"

Rai took cautious steps forward and looked at the grassy area where the four lights intersected. The place Leaks's words pointed to was most likely here.

"Stand there."

He jerked his chin at Konoe.
Konoe took somewhat cautious steps into that grassy area. Once Konoe approached the lights confined to that area they shined brighter.

“Do I need to do anything?”

Konoe asked uneasily as he turned toward Rai.

“Like what?”

“……I don’t know. A ritual or something?”

“Were we deceived?”

Rai sighed after Konoe’s mumbled words.They weren’t making any progress.

“These stones are unusual. I’ve never seen stones like these before.”

Asato looked at one of the stones then tilted his head as if he had realized something.

“Is that……a crest?”

On top of the stone was something like a seal carved into it. He recognized that seal.

“That shape……”

He recognized the seals carved into each of the four stones. Rai reflexively looked at Konoe and narrowed his eye.

“This one……this one, and even this one. They’re all—the same as Konoe’s markings.”

Asato struck him with the truth.
Konoe’s markings and the carved seals. What did it all mean?

“Konoe?”

Asato called his name uneasily.

Konoe was clearly acting strange.
Asato grasped Konoe's shoulders and at almost the same time, Konoe fell to his knees and threw up his stomach contents.

"Gah……hah……"

A cold sweat broke on his forehead, and his face became pale as if it were sheer.

"Hang in there."

Asato said then reflexively turned to Rai.
Konoe lost consciousness in Asato's arms.

"Let him go."

"No!"

"Stupid cat."

Rai got on his knees next to Asato and inserted himself between him and Konoe, then laid Konoe's limp body down with his face against the ground. Asato was a little reluctant, but he knew what he was doing. Rai stuck a finger into Konoe's mouth. Vomit flowed out of Konoe's mouth, still completely passed out. This way the vomit wouldn't block his trachea. He wiped his mouth and laid him on his side. Asato looked nervously at Konoe whose eyes were still shut with an anguished expression. Rai stood up and checked the stone next to him. Without a doubt it was the same design as Konoe's markings. Considering that, he had a hard time thinking Konoe had *just* passed out. He wondered if they should force him back to consciousness, or continue to observe him.

At that moment…

"Konoe……?"

He heard Asato's quiet voice. When he turned around, Konoe was opening his eyes slowly.

"……Asato?"

“Are you all right?”

Konoe slowly lifted his body as he called out the name of the cat before him quietly.

“You’ve awakened.”

Rai finally spoke to Konoe.

“What in the world happened?”

“You suddenly passed out.”

Asato answered Konoe’s question.

“……I passed out?”

“You were groaning a lot.”

He saw Konoe rub his stomach as if he were searching for something at Asato’s words.
His coat had become turned back and exposed his arms.

“……hey.”

Observing Konoe’s body, Rai grabbed his arm without thinking.

“Ngh…….”

Konoe raised his voice when his arm was grasped and twisted up.

“……what’s the meaning of this?”

“The markings are gone.”

Asato spoke up at Rai’s question.
Those black markings had disappeared from Konoe’s arms. His ears and tail had also changed from black to white with light brown.

“……they’re back to normal……”

Konoe muttered neither relieved or surprised.

“Are my ears back too?”

“Yes.”

Asato nodded at Konoe’s question.

“Does this mean the curse has been lifted?”

“That’s……”

Rai asked, but when Konoe tried to answer, the air shifted. They were wrapped in a turbulent air around them.The moment he reflexively stood on his guard, a black flame appeared in the sky above them.The flame flared up and became a shadow.

“Leaks……!”

Konoe called out that name with a quiet growl. Rai put his hand on the hilt of his sword. He wouldn’t let him run away this time.

“Ooh. You escaped the devils’ darkness safely.”

Leaks said indifferently.

“What do you mean……!”

“It doesn’t matter. They failed.”

Leaks held out his hand toward Konoe who at this moment looked like he was ready to jump at him. A flame lit up on the four stones.
Red, blue, yellow and green.
The four colored flames flared up. On top of that, black shadows wavered inside of those flames. A shadow of a creature different from a cat floated into each flame.
Perhaps they were devils. A sinister air shrouded the area.

“A long time ago, this place overflowed with evil power. You all were born in this place. But it’s all dried up now.”

Leaks explained as he looked at the four devils.

“In the end, you weren’t able to capture anyone. How unfortunate. Is this really all devils and their fearsome powers are capable of?”

“We have no excuses.”

The devil with a black mask in the green flame answered as he shrugged his shoulders. He had a feeling he had glanced at him, but since that mask was covering his face, he couldn’t be sure.

“Of course.”

“That cat just had a steadfast heart.”

The devil with the fire-like red hair in the red flame said.

“As compensation, I will be given your power.”

The devils’ faces all changed color at Leaks’s words.

“That’s the first we’re hearing about that.”

The devil in the blue flame that had been quiet until then opened his mouth.

“That was the agreement. At the least, you should lament your own failures.”

“What tyranny.”

A flame resided in the red devil’s hand. Leaks laughed from the depths of this throat.

“You think we’d let you……huh!?”

The devil in the yellow flame swung his hand with a yellow light in it down.The light split the air like a flash of lightning and headed towards Leaks. However, the light disappeared just before it reached Leaks as if it hit an invisible wall.

“Useless.”

Leaks slowly clenched his hand.The swaying four colored flames

behind the devils started to flicker.

“……I figured we wouldn’t get on well with you from the start.”

The devil with the green flame behind him distorted his face.

“It was an unexpected meeting. For me too.”

Leaks said with a voice traced with laughter.
As the tips of those four flames fluttered, they started to draw towards Leaks little by little.
With his hand still on the hilt of his sword, Rai waited for the right moment. Now was not the time to act.
The four devils fell to their knees one by one. Then the four flames gathered toward Leaks. The flames turned into a small orb with traces of a beautiful light and settled above Leaks’s hand.

“I accept.”

Leaks laughed.

“……kh, bastard……”

“You were planning this from the start…”

The devils’ forms started to fade.

“Now then, if we’re talking about intentions, then I certainly only had one. I need your power right now. However, if any of you all would have killed that cat, there wouldn’t have been a problem.”

“……you used us.”

“Don’t ruin my reputation. Now then, sorry, but I’m done with you all. You can disappear now.”

Leaks clenched his fist and pulled it towards his chest. He then opened his hand once again and the orb of light disappeared without a trace.
At that moment, the fading devils’ bodies warped as if they were being swallowed up by something and then changed into a pure white ash.

“……monster.”

Rai muttered as he looked up at Leaks in the raining ash. Leaks’s gaze moved down to Konoe.

“……just what are your intentions? What did those devils have to do with me?”

Without answering Konoe’s questions, Leaks let a smile show from behind his mask.

“You’ve amused me quite a bit. So I’ll give you just one bit of advice. Those who form a deep bond with you will eventually share your same fate.”

“What do you mean?”

Konoe asked getting worked up.

“I wonder. Well then, for now we must part for a short moment.”

Leaks spread the black cloak he was wrapped in. The fluttering cloth wrapped around Leaks’s body and turned into a black shadow.

“Wait!”

Konoe leaped up high, but Leaks’s shadow turned into an orb and floated even higher.
It then melted into the sky starting to be covered in the darkness of night.

“……damn it.”

Konoe landed in the grassy area.

“……this isn’t the end.”

Konoe muttered as he pound his clenched fists onto the ground.
There were no longer any markings on those arms.
Just what happened to Konoe’s body?

“What happened while you were passed out?”

When asked, Konoe lifted his face in surprise.

“How did your curse lift? Speak.”

When Rai continued his harsh words, Konoe looked at his arms that no longer had any markings.

“……has my curse really been lifted?”

Konoe muttered asking Rai the opposite question. Konoe’s eyes wavered. His ears were lowered.
He held his clenched fists straight out and grabbed both of Rai’s arms.

“How do you know my curse has been lifted? There’s no proof. I may still be cursed. How can we really know? Do you know? How……”

Konoe’s eyes were full of anxiety. He figured it was an obvious reaction. But—

“Konoe.”

Asato quietly called his name.

“You should rest for today, we’ll think about it tomorrow. This place is bad. We should keep moving.”

Konoe turned to Asato. He quietly loosened his grip on Rai’s arms.

“……sorry.”

Rai sighed as he looked at the back of Konoe’s lowered head.

“We’ll spend the night in this forest. Once day breaks we’ll return to Ransen.”

Rai slung his equipment on his shoulder, grasped Konoe’s arms, and stood him up.

“……what if they go after us again in the city?”

“Do you intend on just wandering around aimlessly? From the way Leaks was talking I don’t think he’d challenge you right away.”

Konoe’s gaze continued to face the ground. He was a little annoyed.

“But.”

“If you think you’re going to be killed now, then you’ll be killed. He has his own plans……he’s provoking you.”

It seemed Konoe’s life had purpose to Leaks. In other words, even if his curse was lifted, nothing had been resolved.
However—that was better than having the marks of the curse on his body. He had no choice but to think of his situation as changed for the better.

“……got it.”

Konoe replied quietly as he turned away from the four stones. He followed his gaze without thinking, and it overlapped with Asato’s gaze. Asato nodded slightly. They needed to rest more than anything right now. Rai nodded back at Asato a bit, then looked at Konoe.
He didn’t know what he’d have to bear from now on. But now it was the same for him. It had been once he had decided to pair up with Konoe as his Sanga, but now he only needed to remove this new obstacle. He couldn’t help thinking about it. Rai checked to see if Konoe, who had been looking at the four stones had started walking. He then started to walk with long strides in order to get ahead of him.
First of all, they needed to look for a place to rest.

The gentle rays from the Moon of Light started to shine around the area. Last night they left that vacant area, entered the forest, and immediately looked for a place to rest. Once Konoe put down his equipment, he crumpled down to sleep, as Rai and Asato spent the night taking turns keeping watch. Now they were waiting for Konoe to wake up. He wanted to get to Ransen as quickly as possible, but if Konoe didn’t regain his strength, it’d be difficult to travel. It wasn’t that far of a distance, but if Konoe passed out by

chance, it'd be a pain to have to carry him all the way back to Ransen.
He knew that indulging on sleep until they woke up on their own was the most ideal for a cat's recovery from fatigue. That's why Rai and Asato waited for Konoe to wake up on his own. Konoe who was breathing softly in his sleep stirred. He was going to wake up soon, Rai thought as he watched him with his arms crossed. Konoe's breathing became rough. Asato who was sitting across from him, watched Konoe nervously. He was probably groaning from his dreams. The sleeping Konoe clenched his fists. Konoe's body suddenly jerked as he woke up. He let out a deep breath and looked up at the sky in a daze with his forehead drenched in sweat.

"Are you all right?"

Asato spoke to him. Konoe must not have been fully awake yet as he just stared at Asato.

"You were groaning quite a bit."

"Ears."

Seemingly awake, Konoe muttered in a hoarse voice.

"……ears?"

Asato asked back.

"Mine. ……what color are they?"

When asked, Asato smiled a little.

"They're not black. They're white, with a little brown on them."

"……I see."

Konoe sighed in relief. Asato stared at Konoe's tail. It was an unremarkable white crooked tail with a light brown tip.

"What?"

Konoe asked noticing his gaze.

“……nothing. I was just thinking…….your tail is that color too.”

Asato stared at his tail.

“……it is, but……Asato?”

Konoe lifted his body uneasily, as he called Asato’s name. Asato, who was looking at Konoe’s tail as if he were entranced by it, moved his ears in surprise.

“……ah, it’s nothing.”

“Is my tail really that weird?”

“No……it’s because your tail, back to its original color, is also pretty.”

“You should try going to the city of Ransen. You’d be pretty popular there.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Rai scoffed at Konoe and Asato’s excessive exchange.

“What?”

Konoe looked toward him annoyed.

“It’s a childish color.”

Konoe furrowed his brow at Rai’s words.

“There are plenty of cats with this sort of coloring.”

The way Konoe responded was like a child.

“I don’t care about anyone else. I’m talking about you.”

“Hey now.”

“Your looks match your personality now.”

Rai turned away and stood up. If he had the energy to complain, then it was all right to head out soon.

“Don’t talk bad about Konoe.”

Asato cut into the conversation and let out a small growl.

“It’s the truth—let’s head out now.”

Rai started to get dressed.
At this point, it looked like they could arrive in Ransen when the Moon of Light was high.

Once they were only a short distance from Ransen, Rai suddenly turned toward Konoe walking behind him.
Asato was following Konoe from behind.

“Yesterday—what happened when you passed out?”

Konoe looked up at his questioning words. He seemed to search for his answer for a moment.

“……I met the devils.”

When he spoke uneasily, his gaze wavered and his voice lowered.

“When you passed out?”

“It felt like something not quite like a dream or reality.”

It was probably reality under the guise of a dream.
He had heard of types of demons that could manipulate dreams.

“Their true forms?”

“Yes.”

“Your proof?”

“I don’t have any. But, they weren’t shadows. It was definitely their true forms.”

Konoe lifted his face as he spoke with a firm tone. Rai continued

his questions.

“Did it have to do with the marks of your curse disappearing?”

“……I don’t know.”

Konoe shook his head. The markings on Konoe’s body and the seals carved into the four stones were exactly the same. What did those stones have to do with those devils? Rai turned back to face ahead of him. They were close to a break in the greenery.
To that village.
Behind him, Konoe’s body tensed. They stepped into that village.
The evidence that last night wasn’t a dream was that deserted village without a single cat’s presence.
Konoe stopped his feet. Rai continued his steps, and without turning around, spoke to Konoe.

“There’s no time to give into sentimentality—this is the outcome of all things.”

Konoe once again started walking at those words.

Lamento Beyond the Void Expiatio (Tomoko Kanemaki/N＋C) Chapter 4

Caput 4

The city of Ransen was bustling as usual. No, actually it was more boisterous than usual. He saw flags with Ransen's crest drawn on them hanging from the eaves of the buildings. Noticing the change in the city's atmosphere, Konoe's gaze was busy looking all around. He couldn't spot Asato, he must have disliked crowds. He could feel his presence on top of a nearby building.

"Antou, huh."

Rai said that name before Konoe could ask him about it.

"Antou?"

"It's the biggest winter festival in Shisa that's held in Ransen. It's like a ritual to ward off certain devils."

He had stayed in Ransen several times during festival time. There were stalls lined up with strange costumes and masks. Flowers decorated the city all throughout. On the day of the festival, the cats filled the streets in costume. There were a lot of merchants and sight-seeing cats from the neighboring towns.

"We probably won't be able to get an inn, huh."

Konoe said uneasily. Rai turned to Konoe and spoke.

"Let's go to that inn from before."

"But……"

"That inn keeper owes you, right?"

In the end, he had never met the strange inn keeper that pushed Konoe into watching the inn while he was gone, but they should make the most of his favor.

“……let’s try to ask.”

Konoe replied a little uncomfortable.

When they opened the door to the inn, different from before, the lobby was full of several cats. There was a single cat at the counter. He recognized that cat. That big tiger-striped cat.

It can’t be.

The commotion from the cats in the lobby started to fade, and his vision blurred. The words Konoe exchanged with the cat at the counter didn’t reach his ears. He didn’t think he’d meet him in a place like this. Konoe turned to him. The cat behind the counter—Bardo, turned his gaze toward him.

“……why is that bastard here?”

He asked reflexively in a voice so low it crawled along the ground.

“Why? Because I’m the inn keeper here. It’d be weird if I wasn’t here. More importantly, that was quite the greeting after all this time.”

Bardo’s expression didn’t change all that much as he watched Rai with his arms crossed.

“Shut up.”

“So you’re Konoe’s companion. What a small world.”

Bardo’s mouth contorted into a smile. The world certainly was small—meeting him in a place like this, it was way too small. Konoe looked back and forth from Rai to Bardo. He became annoyed by Bardo’s unflinching gaze watching him. He was shaking—?

“……you haven’t fixed that bad habit of yours yet?”

Bardo said with a sarcastic tone. His body moved out of reflex. Konoe’s surprised gaze shook. The short sword he had thrown pierced the counter. Bardo didn’t even flinch.

“Don’t get so violent, you’ll disturb the other guests.”

Bardo said in a low voice. That voice wasn’t trembling at all.

“……hey, let’s go.”

Rai said from behind Konoe. Konoe turned toward him nervously.

“There are plenty of other places. They may not have any vacancies though. If you don’t want to see my face then just close your eyes when you go by the counter.

Bardo said with his elbows on the counter as he flicked the short sword in front of him. His tone annoyed him.

“Don’t be so hot headed—cats that let the blood rush to their heads die quickly.”

Rai bit the inside of his mouth at Bardo’s words. The taste of blood slowly spread through his mouth. He had heard those cautionary words from Bardo several times before. Bardo looked up at him. Those eyes were filled with a calm color.

“Calm down a bit.”

A voice suddenly interrupting brought Rai back to his senses. It was Konoe’s voice.

“……what was that?”

He reflexively replied.

“You may have your issues, but we probably won’t be able to find another inn with vacancies, unless you want to camp out. He’s returning my favor. So I’m going to stay here. If you want to go somewhere else, then go by yourself.”

Konoe said without pause. He then looked at Rai with a stern gaze. Konoe was frantic as usual, no matter the situation. Rai coldly recovered from his desperation. He let out a deep breath.

“Whatever. Do what you want.”

Rai turned around and headed towards the stairs to the second floor. He waited for Konoe in the second floor hallway. He felt his upturned hair start to go back to normal as he waited. After a while, he sensed Konoe coming up the stairs.

“……this is yours.”

Konoe held out his short sword. Rai took it back and returned it to its sheath.

“……um.”

Konoe searched for the words he wanted to say.

“What?”

“……why didn’t you leave? You don’t like him, right? That innkeeper.”

Even though earlier he had spoken to him in such a harsh tone, Konoe was now speaking hesitantly like a completely different cat.

“Of course I wanted to leave right away, but since you’re staying here, I have no choice.”

Rai sighed as he crossed his arms.

“You’re my precious Sanga. It’d be unfortunate if something were to happen to you while we were apart.”

That may not have been much of a righteous cause, Rai thought vaguely. He didn’t want to stay in Bardo’s inn—but…
Konoe lowered his head. He was probably wondering about Bardo and his relationship. However, unless Konoe asked him himself, he had no intention of telling him. Konoe lifted his face uneasily in the heavy silence.

“There are two rooms to the right. Which do you……”

In the middle of his speech, he heard the sound of tapping on the window. When they turned around, they saw the upside down upper body of a black cat on the other side of the large window at the end of the hall.

“……Asato?”

“What is he, a lizard?”

Rai furrowed his brows. When Konoe opened the window, Asato climbed into down into the hallway. He then spoke.

“Did you get a room?”

“We were just talking about that. It’s those two rooms. Two of us will have to stay in one……”

“I’m fine staying with Konoe.”

Asato interrupted Konoe’s words as he looked at Rai with a clear hostile gaze.

“The servant intends on staying in the same room as his master, huh.”

“You hurt Konoe. So I won’t let you stay with him.”

“It’s not your decision.”

His conversations with Asato were always tit for tat.

“……I’m fine either way. Maybe you two can stay together.”

Konoe said with a sigh, but Asato and Rai answered back at almost the same time.

“No way.”

“If that was a joke, I’m not laughing.”

Konoe looked down and shook his head a bit.

“I’m fine either way. Do whatever you want.”

He then put his hand on the knob of the room in front of him. Rai grasped his shoulder to stop him. He looked up at him with an annoyed gaze.

“What?”

“You’re staying in the same room as me.”

Konoe knit his brows at those words.

“Stop talking like everything you say is the way things are going to be.”

Konoe said angrily.

“Are you an idiot? We have Sanga and sword training. It would be more convenient to be in the same room.”

“……yeah.”

Konoe nodded a little. Somehow this idiot did seem to consider his own stubbornness over that servant’s.

“I’m not going to argue about something so stupid. Don’t lump me with this servant.”

“……I’ll kill you.”

When Rai spoke indifferently, Asato turned his hostility toward him.

“…….anyway, I get it.”

Konoe nodded and Asato lowered his ears.

“It’s not like we’ll be working apart. It’ll just be when we’re in the inn.”

“……right.”

“You can come over whenever you like.”

"……I guess so."

Rai turned away from their stupid conversation and went into the room first. It was different from the room they stayed in before, but the set up was pretty much the same. Konoe came in a little later. Rai put down his equipment next to the bed then stood by the window with his back turned to him, and started to groom. He opened the window and looked down at the traffic in the street. As evening drew close in the city, the commotion increased. It had been many years since he had seen Bardo. He had at least never seen him since leaving Setsura. He didn't want to ever see him again. That feeling overlapping with not wanting to ever return to Setsura was implanted into his heart. Bardo had done *that* sort of thing to him. If he hadn't done that, Rai might have still been in Setsura.

"Rai."

He turned toward the voice directed at him. Konoe finished grooming and was wrapped in the coat he had taken off earlier, looking much more relaxed.

"I thought I'd go out for a bit, did you want to go with me?"

Konoe looked straight at him. Konoe may get mixed up with something unnecessary, but he didn't feel like going out right now.

"I need to tend to my sword. Don't get caught by some guys or whatever."

"……right."

Konoe turned away from him with his tail dangling behind him. Rai watched Konoe's back as he left the room, then leaned against the wall and took out his long sword. The blade had become rather scratched after cutting down all those cats from that village. He started to quietly tend to his sword as his mind became clouded by unnecessary thoughts. He didn't care what Bardo was doing now.

I was still young when I was unable to forgive Bardo from that time, he thought.

Rai lifted his face as the cold night air came in from the window. It was already this late. The room was dim. He got up to light a lamp, but remembered that Konoe was afraid of fire. He was afraid of fire, he was obstinate, everything about Konoe was like a child, he thought. However, the time when he was with Bardo, he was also like a child himself. Rai pulled out a leaf called the “guiding leaf” from his travel bag. It was a leaf that absorbed the rays of the Moon of Light, and once it was placed into water, glowed faintly. It was said that it got its name from lost traveling cats who were guided by its light on rainy nights. It was normal for traveling cats to have a few of them on hand. He pulled out a small dish from the same travel bag, filled it with water, and submerged the leaf in it. He then placed it onto the shelf next to the door. That amount of light was enough. Rai once again sat against the wall and started to tend to his sword.

Konoe returned late into the night. Both of them curled into bed without exchanging many words. It didn’t take him long to fall asleep. Rai then dreamed—a red dream.

Warm.

That was the first thing he thought. The rhythm of the sound of dripping etched itself into his ears, and comforted him. Red. His hands, feet, body, the whole world was red. Rai was wrapped in a red warmth. Nothing but red spread like a muddy sky. Rai sat in the middle of it. Even the hair on his tail was soaked in red.

At this rate, won’t it be dyed that color?

He wondered. His cupped hands had scooped some of it up, and a red stream overflowed from them. Before his eyes, there were two mounds. Two mounds floating in this red lake. One of the mounds was facing downward, while the other one turned upward. They were cats. They were Rai’s birth parents. He could no longer tell what color hair or eyes they had, or what their faces looked like, completely covered in blood. But there was one thing that was certain. Neither of his parents were looking at him. Nothing had changed. Whether they were dead or alive, neither of them would look at Rai, nothing had changed at all. His parents no longer drew breath. It was sad—it was sad, he thought. However, more than that, Rai’s heart was filled with—warmth. That imagined warmth was surrounding him. This warmth had once been inside of his parents, and it made Rai happy. The tip of his tail swayed

contently. Red splashed up. He became intoxicated on the overpowering smell. The warmth was sweet. He wanted more. He wanted to be wrapped up in it more.

More, more—.

He awoke there. Rai sat up and reflexively pressed his right eye. His body was hot. His right eye hurt. His breathing was labored.

"……are you all right?"

Rai looked at the bed beside his when spoken to. Konoe was watching him uneasily.

"……did I wake you?"

Rai's breathing was rough and his voice hoarse.

"……no. Does your eye hurt?"

He didn't know how to answer Konoe's question. More than anything, he still felt the feelings from his dream, and sick. No, he wasn't really sure if what he felt was sick.

"You were groaning. Did you have a bad dream?"

Rai let out a deep breath at Konoe's question, then spoke.

"I had a nightmare about the day my eye was injured."

"A nightmare?"

That may not have been an accurate answer. It only shared the same feature of being covered in blood as the dream of when he lost his right eye. He rarely had the dream of the day his parents died.

"……just go to sleep."

Rai said then turned away from Konoe, and curled up in bed. He stared at the wall absentmindedly for a while. He no longer felt the pain in his right eye. That dream—the dream of the day his parents

were killed by bandits. His father was a prominent sword master of Setsura. His mother was a servant-like female to his father. He had a memory of being given a sword and training, but he had no memory of ever being held by his parents. His father was strict. Instead, the one who held him up in their arms when he was young was his father's friend—Bardo. Once his parents had died, the one who raised him was also Bardo. Rai crossed his arms as he lay down, and closed his eyes. That night was over once he had awoke from a harsh sound. Once he was awake, the memory of seeing his parents' dead bodies was incredibly vague. He heard Konoe turn over behind him. For some reason he seemed unable to go back to sleep as well. Rai let out a small sigh, and curled up to wrap his arms around his knees. *It'll be all right*—he'd have no more dreams. Rai then slowly dozed off.

The next day was the first day of the 'Antou' festival. Konoe groomed as his tail swayed restlessly. He couldn't help but be interested in the commotion coming from outside the window. His swaying tail gently set itself on him. Konoe gasped.

"Country cat. That's how you're acting."

Rai said as he stepped on the crooked part of Konoe's tail. A cat's tail was their only weak spot. Even though he barely hit it, it must have hurt quite a bit.

"Let go."

Konoe said annoyed as Rai scoffed and moved his foot away. Konoe immediately grabbed his tail and started to lick it as he glared at Rai. He watched Konoe from the corner of his eyes as he got dressed. Konoe finished getting dressed a little after him.

"Let's go."

"I'll get Asato too."

Once they went out the door, Konoe knocked on the room next to theirs. After a little while, Asato came out. All three of them headed downstairs.

There were a lot of cats in costumes and masks in the lobby.

“……strange.”

Asato and Konoe stopped. This must have been the first time they had seen cats in costume.

“……..this is the attire for ‘Antou’?”

“They’re costumes.”

Rai answered as he stepped into the lobby. The cats during Antou each had their own costumes.

“What are you guys just standing over there for? Come down.”

That voice was directed toward Konoe and Asato behind him. Rai reflexively clicked his tongue at that voice.

“How were the beds? Did you sleep well? Today is the first day of Antou. It’s starting to pick up.”

Bardo said with a leisurely tone and gait as he approached them. Rai turned his face away to avoid Bardo’s gaze. He consciously tried not to listen to the words Konoe Bardo started to exchange. After a while the conversation ended and Bardo went behind the counter.

“What are you going to do after this?”

Konoe asked as Rai sighed a little. He had planned on going out into the city to gather information, but without answering Konoe’s question, Rai pushed open the inn door. Konoe and Asato followed after him.

The street traffic yesterday was nothing compared to today. They were inundated by music and conversation. There were cats in costume all around them. Konoe was probably overwhelmed by the commotion, so he turned around, but when he did, Konoe was nowhere to be found. Instead, Asato was standing there with an extremely gloomy look on his face.

“What happened to Konoe?”

“I lost him.”

“……stupid cat.”

They pushed their way through the cats, and peeked into an alley. Without a doubt, he must have slipped into one of them.

That troublesome cat.

Asato also followed behind him. Once they had looked into several alleys, they finally saw Konoe’s figure.

“Konoe!”

Asato called out to him before he did. Ahead of him, he saw Konoe—surrounded by four devils. Rai quickened his pace as he drew closer, and pulled out his long sword. Asato did the same.

“Huuuh? Hey, hey, wait a sec. Right now, this cat and all of us are just……”

“Shut up. Get away from him.”

Rai said to the white haired devil as he readied his sword.

“We haven’t done anything.”

“Didn’t Leaks extinguish you all?”

“That’s what we were trying to explain to this kitten right now.”

“Don’t bother. You’re probably just Leaks’s puppets.”

Rai said interrupting each of the devils’ words.

“……tch. What a pain, this is why I hate cats. Hey, shorty.”

“It’s not shorty, it’s Konoe.”

Konoe replied to the yellow devil.

“You look like a shorty to me. But that’s not the point. Anyway, I said it earlier. Lying is you guys and a human’s specialty. We don’t

lie. Ever."

"We're faithful to our desires. Even though that could be called evil, we do what we want, when we want. In return, we won't deceive anyone. Everything we've said up to now is the truth. "

The yellow devil and the green devil spoke.

"……so you plan on eating me?"

"……eat?"

Asato's tail swung wide at Konoe's reply, as he glared at the devils, growling quietly.

"That's what we were trying to talk about before we were interrupted. For now, I'd be happy if you would let me finish speaking."

The green devil tilt his head as he glanced at Rai. Since his face was covered by a mask, he couldn't really be sure if or *why* his gaze was on him.

"We don't need to listen to you. It's pointless."

Rai readied his long sword as he glared right at the devils.

"Tell me."

However, Konoe answered for him. At those words, the green devil spread both of his arms then put a hand to his chest and bowed his head exaggeratedly. That behavior reminded him of that clown.

"I'm honored to have your permission. Before that though, why don't we introduce ourselves to the kitties behind you. I'm Froud. This is is—"

"Verg."

The green devil—Froud said, and the yellow devil—Verg, continued.

“Then this is Kaltz, and—Razel.”

Each of the devils, the blue devil Kaltz, and the red devil Razel, turned their gazes toward Rai and the others.

“Make sure to remember all that, okay? Now then, I’ll continue our conversation. First of all, to sum things up, we want to destroy Leaks. Of course, so we can get our stolen power back. So that’s that. We just have one proposition……since we might as well, why don’t we team up?”

Froud said with a gentle tone. That tone gave Rai an increasingly bad feeling.

“……what do you mean?”

Rai asked with his sword still readied.

“You’re going after Leaks, right? This would be a good chance to cooperate with each other. For now, we’ll have a truce.”

“Working together would be more efficient. “

Razel replied. Kaltz next to him continued to stay silent.

“Right now, our power was stolen by Leaks. This situation leaves us unarmed so to speak. This would be the best chance for you all to fight us. Once we destroy Leaks, our power will return to us. It won’t be too late to face us after that.”

Razel said indifferently.

“……you have no proof that this isn’t a trap.”

“Gaaah—proof that it’s not a trap, seriously, what a pain!! You want us to do that right here!? Huh!?”

Verg answered Rai, scratching his head.

“Now, now. Calm down.”

Froud’s mouth contorted into a smile as he looked right at him.

“Caution is a good thing. However, anything done in excess will only have the opposite effect. You…well, you have an overly cautious disposition. You would doubt me whether I was up to something or not.”

Froud’s tone was mocking him.

“……what are you trying to say?”

Rai asked him in a low voice. He was extremely annoyed.

“Sometimes you just need courage to jump into the fire. ……well, be as that may, all right, we’ll endure our shame and show you the proof.”

Froud turned to Verg and pointed. Verg frowned in horror.

“Uwah, me? Why me? No way, you do it.”

“I don’t want to.”

Froud replied nonchalantly.

“Wha? What was that? That’s so selfish, jerk. Make Kaltz or Razel do it……”

Verg turned toward them, but Kaltz closed his eyes and turned away while Razel shook his head left and right before pointing his chin towards Verg.

“……there you have it.”

Froud jerked his chin at Verg happily.

“……tch. Fiiine. I’ll do it.”

Verg sulked as he took a step forward, and put a hand to his chest. Verg’s fingertips were sucked into his chest, burying them inside. His face distorted in pain. His hand was buried into his chest up to his wrist, and from there he took out his fist clenching something. When he opened it, there was something emitting a yellow light resting in his palm. It was shaped like a distorted orb

emitting a dim light.

“What do you think this is? Do you know?”

Froud asked.

“It’s the source of our power. More specifically, the embodiment of it. We each have one, but its true form is spherical.”

Kaltz continued.

“Since your power was stolen, its shape distorted……?”

Konoe asked as he looked at the light.

“Its current state is proof that we don’t have our powers. It’s the same as exposing our weaknesses. That should be enough, right?”

Verg said curtly as he pushed the glowing crystal back into his chest.

“You believe us now?”

Froud turned toward Rai, crossing his arms.

“……do what you want.”

Rai lowered his sword as he spat his curt words.

“Should we?”

Rai turned his face away at Konoe’s question.

“I don’t care.”

In this case, he had no choice but to rely on Konoe’s judgment.

“You’re all right with this too, aren’t you?”

Froud asked peeking at Konoe’s face.

“So you won’t eat me until we defeat Leaks, huh.”

At Konoe's words, Froud's mouth once again contorted into a smile.

"If possible, we'd like to avoid the primitive method of eating you physically, head first. Besides, could you imagine devils fist fighting it out to decide who would go first? It'd be weird, right? It's all to get our power back."

Konoe's gaze dropped to the ground. After a brief silence he lifted his face.

"……got it."

Konoe nodded.

"Then negotiations are complete. Until we destroy Leaks, we won't eat you. We promise."

Konoe let out a long sigh at Froud's words. He seemed to have been rather nervous.

"What are you guys going to do now?"

Konoe asked the devils.

"You kitties are staying at an inn, right?"

"That's right."

Konoe nodded facing Froud and the other devils.

"Well then, we better go there too."

Verg said.

"……to the inn?"

Konoe asked back, brows knit. He had never heard of devils staying at an in before, but—he had never heard of devils who had lost their powers team up with cats before either.

"We shouldn't let you out of our sights."

Kaltz sighed a little.

“We don’t know if someone will gain the upper hand, and it would be unfortunate if you just up and died. It’d be bad for you too if we weren’t around.”

Konoe looked at Rai when Verg finished speaking.

“……what should we do?”

“I don’t care. It’s your decision.”

He could answer nothing else but that.

“Since we have horns coming out of our heads, we’re not something you see in this world every day. I’m a little excited to stay at an inn in the city, fufufu.”

Froud’s body squirmed happily. It was extremely discomforting. Rai sheathed his sword and looked at the devils. The devils they were exchanging words with didn’t look much different from cats aside from their horns and tails.

“At least do something about those horns and smooth tails for now. They stand out.”

Konoe said annoyed.

“It’s the middle of a festival right now. If we say they’re costumes, no one will question it.”

“And once the festival is over?”

Konoe asked back.

“We’ll deal with it then. Some way or another.”

“Now then, why don’t you show us the way to the inn, kitty?”

Konoe away started to walk away with heavy footsteps. Even so, Rai walked up next to Konoe.

“Hey, stupid cat.”

Konoe glared back at Rai as usual.

“What?”

“Didn’t I tell you not to wander off? Are you directionally challenged? Even though you’re a cat?”

Konoe gasped at Rai’s words. It was unlikely he would wonder away from again now. He was directionally challenged even though he was a cat.

“Oh my, he’s directionally challenged, even though he’s a kitty?”

“He’s directionally challenged even though he’s a cat?”

“……directionally challenged, huh?”

“He got lost?”

“That’s the first time I’ve heard that.”

Konoe’s tail sagged at the words coming from the mouths of the devils and Asato.

Konoe negotiated with the shocked Bardo about lodgings for the devils. Rai watched them absentmindedly from near the entrance away. He didn’t need to assist Konoe with his ridiculously troublesome decision. He took this opportunity to carefully observe each of the devil’s movements. The devils seemed otherworldly somehow. Except for the blue devil—Kaltz. Rai assumed the negotiations were completed successfully. The devils went upstairs and Konoe turned toward him and Asato.

“What a noisy bunch. Just their presences are noisy.”

Rai muttered as his tail beat against the wall.

“Konoe, are you going to go look around the festival again?”

Asato asked Konoe.

“Yeah. We ended up coming back before I could see anything.”

“I see. I’ll be in my room.”

“Are you tired?”

He vaguely listened to Konoe and Asato’s conversation. It appeared Asato hated crowds quite a bit.

“You should rest some……don’t sharpen your claws in the room.”

Asato nodded at Konoe’s words. Around himself, Konoe was like a child, but conversely, around Asato, Konoe was like a big brother. Rai opened his mouth as he watched Asato go upstairs.

“Are you going back out into the street?”

“Yeah, but……I can go by myself.”

Konoe’s reply was somewhat gloomy. For some reason, he seemed to think he wouldn’t go with him.

“Who said I wasn’t going?”

“Huh?”

A surprised hue flashed across Konoe’s face.

“Since there are various people going after you.”

Rai uncrossed his arms, and headed towards the entranceway. Besides, having a look around the festival, wasn’t such a bad thing.

“Hurry up.”

He said to Konoe. He then heard his footsteps behind him. The excitement in the crowded streets had increased. A parade had started in the main street. In the middle was a costumed procession and giant papier-mâché puppets going by. Aside from that, there was a band lined up playing merry music. Seemingly overwhelmed, Konoe watched the parade in astonishment. Rai remembered Konoe’s first time coming to Ransen. Even though not many days had passed since then, it felt like it was such a long time ago. He

called out to Konoe who was still watching the parade.

“Hey.”

Konoe looked up in surprise. His face looked nervous for some reason.

“What are you doing?”

When asked, Konoe’s ears and gaze flinched.

“……I want to see it all.”

“All of what?”

Rai asked back to his hesitant words. He crossed his arms again. Konoe continued to speak.

“The festival.”

“What do you think you’re looking at?”

“I can only see parts of it from here. So…”

“How do you intend on watching it all then?”

“I could climb up somewhere.”

Konoe’s gaze turned toward the top of a building. Ransen’s buildings were tall. If they watched from up there, they could certainly look over the entire festival.

“……do what you want.”

Konoe smiled at Rai’s reply.

“I saw a tree from the window on the second floor of the inn. We could climb up from there.”

Together with Konoe, he went around to the back of the inn. A tree grew there straight up toward the sky. Konoe swiftly climbed up the tree. Cats were a species that had no troubling climbing to begin with. Climbing trees was as natural as walking to them. Then

again, since there are cats in this world who are directionally challenged, there may also be cats who dislike climbing trees. Without looking back, Konoe walked along the roof of a building facing the main street. He then sat down on top of a building where he could see the parade. During that time, Konoe hadn't looked back, which made him think this was how he was able to wander off all the time, but for now, that wasn't important. Rai followed behind Konoe, jumping onto the roof, then sat down next to him. Completely absorbed in the parade, Konoe didn't seem to notice him sitting beside him.

"Are you satisfied now?"

When spoken to, Konoe turned to him. The wind blew through his hair.

"It's amazing. It's like the whole street has come alive."

"All the noise hasn't changed though."

As Rai looked down at the parade, the flowing music reached his ears. Come to think of it, he had never looked upon the city of Ransen like this before. When he moved his gaze further away, he saw the forests surrounding the city.

"Karou is probably over in that area."

Konoe said as he pointed out ahead. Buried in the forest, he couldn't tell exactly where the village was located. However, that may have been a good thing.

"I wonder."

Rai muttered as he narrowed his eye and looked in a different direction from where Konoe was pointing. Unlike Konoe, he didn't think much about his hometown—at least, he shouldn't. However, he was now searching for—Setsura. He was probably looking for the village he had never returned to since he left because of that dream.

"It's probably over in that area."

“What is?”

Konoe tilted his head at the words he had said to himself.

“Setsura.”

Once he had said the name of that village, Konoe looked directly toward where Rai was pointing.

“What’s Setsura like?”

“It’s nothing special, just a normal village.”

“They have a bloodline of large species there, right? Do the other cats there have strange shaped ears and tails too?”

“To us, wouldn’t you be the one who’s strange?”

“Well, that’s true.”

As they exchanged their small talk, Konoe’s tail swayed calmly. His own tail was also swaying in the same way.

“I’ve never seen anyone with a tail like yours in Setsura. “

Konoe’s tail stopped moving at Rai’s observation. Konoe seemed to be self-conscious about his crooked tail for some reason.

“It has an unusual shape, but that’s not a bad thing.”

Rai said as he looked far off into the distance.

“Huh?”

Without looking back at Konoe who questioned him, Rai continued his words.

“I said, it’s not a bad thing.”

When he said that, Konoe’s tail started to sway restlessly.

“What?”

“Nothing……”

Konoe searched for his words.”

“……you don’t climb up on trees or roofs like this much?”

“Not usually. But, long ago I’d often climb trees to look out over the village and landscapes.”

“Long ago?”

This was the first time—the first time he had spoken to anyone about his time in Setsura long ago.

“Yes. When I would go out to hunt and to sword train.”

“You’ve liked fighting since long ago then?”

“……yeah.”

He answered quietly as he thought about his past, about when he and Bardo would go out hunting—and then…

He remembered the smell of blood.

The wind blew by. Konoe had stopped talking. The music from the parade started to fade. Rai slowly stood up.

“It’s over. Let’s go back.”

“……all right.”

Konoe stood up after him. The wind was cold, as dusk fell.

After dinner, time seemed to be going by slowly. Outside of the window, the commotion lingering from the festival was still noisy. The festival would continue tomorrow, and the day after. There were probably groups of cats looking forward to the night festivities more than the daytime ones.

Rai sat on his bed and started to groom. Across from him, Konoe had also started to groom. He recalled the events of the day. Since he always worked alone, he had by no means ever spent his day

like this before. Ever since he left his hometown, he had rarely spent much time with other cats.

“Hey.”

Hearing a voice call to him, Rai looked at Konoe in front of him.

“Why don’t you ever take off that eye patch?”

Rai stopped moving at Konoe’s question, and averted his gaze. He wasn’t sure if he should answer, or even *how* he should answer. He had never been asked that by anyone, so he never talked about it. Naturally, his tail started to sway.

“It’s an old wound.”

Rai muttered, continuing to keep his gaze averted.

“It was given to me by a bounty I was going after. We were in a deadlock.”

Konoe didn’t say a word. Rai continued his story.

“It was a demon that took sacrifices from a small village, up until then, several bounty hunters had gone up against it, but none had been able to kill it which was why the bounty for it was so large.”

Rai slowly took a deep breath.

“Did you kill it……?”

Konoe asked.

“No. It gouged my right eye, and I cut across both of its eyes. But, afterwards, it disappeared.”

Rai finally looked at Konoe. He was looking right back at him.

“……it’s a ridiculous story.”

Rai muttered under his breath as he turned his gaze outside the window. He wasn’t sure if telling him that story was a good thing or not.

"……why did you tell me that story?"

He looked at the curious Konoe.

"You're a Sanga. You should know a few things about your Touga."

Konoe seemed somewhat disappointed by Rai's answer. Konoe's gaze shifted. Konoe's gaze shifted. With his eyes still averted, Konoe asked him another question.

"……Bardo is an acquaintance of yours?"

He wasn't sure what he should say about Bardo. It would be nice if he could just say he was like a father who raised him. However, he hesitated telling him that. He would have to talk about why he ran away from Bardo too if he did.

"It's unimportant."

His gaze dropped to the floor at Rai's reply, keeping his mouth shut. He received no more questions from Konoe after that. Once he was done with his quick grooming, he slid under the covers. It was possible that Konoe took his answer as rejection. He didn't mean it that way. He was just unable to find the right answer. He looked at Konoe's back that was turned to him as he finished his grooming, then crawled under the covers. He heard the music from the night festival in the distance. He felt a comforting exhaustion. At this rate, he felt as though he could sleep without any dreams—.

The next day also had good weather. It welcomed the second day of "Antou". Seeming as though he hadn't gotten much sleep, Konoe was still in bed. Rai got dressed and left the room before him. As he went down the stairs, he glanced at the counter, but Bardo wasn't there. Rai continued on out of the inn, and walked through the back alleyways. Today he planned on meeting with some informants. In a suspicious looking bar in an alley, there were informants he was acquainted with that he could buy miscellaneous information from. It would be faster to speak with them without Konoe since he would be a new face. He didn't think it would be easy to get information on Leaks, but if he could get his hands on even just a little

something, that would be good enough. There was other information he wanted to acquire as well. He opened the door to one of the bars. When he did, the degenerate cats who had been drinking since the morning lifted their heads. Rai approached the counter and ordered a drink.

“I heard a rumor that you’ve been going around with a cute kid lately.”

An unkempt cat at the counter said, smiling widely. His breath stunk of alcohol.

“So even I’m famous now, huh.”

Rai leaned his elbows against the counter and picked up his glass.

“Don’t you have anything interesting to talk about other than me?”

Rai asked as he thrust a paper envelope from his coat at the cat that spoke to him.

“I’ve heard nothing but rumors of demons.”

“What sort of demons?”

“Several different kinds. Not just in Ransen either. There have been stories about ridiculously strong demons appearing in the forests all around. They’ll probably become bounties soon.”

Before he had met Konoe, there had been a lot of rumors about demons showing up near Ransen. But now, demons were increasing all across Shisa. Rather than the rumors being only on the outskirts to Ransen, it was more like it took a while for those rumors to reach them from all over Shisa. It was like a demon infestation, even before he had met Konoe. Even if the demon infestation was influenced by Leaks, that power probably would have been growing since before then. Now that Leaks had absorbed the power from those devils, he imagined that his power could only easily get stronger.

“Anything else?”

Rai drank the alcohol in his shot glass in one gulp.

“Nothing all that interesting.”

“I see.”

Rai placed his glass on the counter, turned around, and left the bar.

Afterwards he went through several other bars, but didn’t hear anything important. He left the alleyways, and headed towards the square in order to return to the inn before Konoe woke up. Suddenly, he saw the hesitant movements of a cat ahead of him. It was Konoe. Konoe slowly approached the wall in the center of square. Just what was he doing? On the wall Konoe’s gaze was fixed on, he saw a green plant swaying in the wind. It was a foxtail plant. It was a plant that kittens would often play with when dangled in front of them. There weren’t many idiotic adults who still played with them. But—Konoe took a big leap toward that foxtail.

“Stupid cat……”

Rai muttered reflexively as Konoe’s hands aiming for that foxtail grabbed nothing but air.

“……ah……”

Konoe stopped moving. Failing to capture their prey was an embarrassment to cats. On top of that, swatting at a foxtail, a toy meant for children, as an adult was unbelievably embarrassing. There was no way an adult cat could fail at swatting a foxtail. Rai approached Konoe with a sigh and picked up the foxtail.

“You really are a surprisingly stupid cat.”

Rai thrust the foxtail at Konoe’s nose.

“But I didn’t think you were this stupid.”

Konoe’s face turned red from embarrassment. His ears, tail and face all drooped down.

“Hey, you wanted this, didn’t you?”

He once again waved the foxtail in front of Konoe’s nose, but Konoe continued to lower his head.

“……jeez.”

Rai threw the foxtail away, and turned around.

“Let’s go.”

When spoken to, Konoe chased after him with quick steps.

The main street was crowded with cats. He wanted to think he wasn’t stupid enough to wander off again, but he was stupid enough to swat at a foxtail. Rai escaped from the street overflowing with cats and headed toward the side of road and leaned against the wall. Konoe also leaned against it next to him.

“What were you doing there?”

Rai asked with a sigh as if he were scolding Konoe whose tail was swaying.

“……nothing. I was looking around the stalls, but then I spotted that plant……”

“The one you thoughtlessly swatted at, and failed splendidly?”

Those words were his final blow, and Konoe’s head drooped gloomily. Rai scoffed as he crossed his arms, watching the traffic.

“And what about you? Where did you go off to?”

Konoe asked, breaking the silence.

“I’m free to go wherever I want.”

“Well, that’s true.”

Konoe once again lowered his head sullenly. He couldn’t help picking on him so much.

“I was looking through back alleys. There are several secret shops there.”

“Secret shops?”

“They’re places you can deal in information.”

Konoe nodded at Rai’s words.

“It may lead us to some clues.”

“Did it?”

“Who knows.”

Rai answered as he turned his gaze back at the crowd. He saw a family across from him. It was a child with his father and mother.

“……it’s a female.”

Konoe muttered. Seeing a female cat walking through the crowds of Ransen was rare. Due to the illness called ‘shikku’. It was a sickness that spread throughout Shisa three years ago that made body parts disappear all of sudden. The mortality rate was high, but the infection rate was basically low—but, that excluded females. The infection rate of females was high, and the death rate was near one hundred percent. Females were a rare sight in Shisa. The result being females became a protected commodity. Without females, the population of cats would not be able to increase. At this rate, the decrease of females would mean the downfall of cats. That alone made females an easy target. Though, you can find plenty of females in other unsavory places, but that was another story. Since older females were a protected commodity, they were a rare sight. Her body was wrapped in cloths, so he couldn’t make out much of her figure, but this mother walking through the crowd seemed to be on the older side. Her gaze was full of peace and warmth.

“……family, huh.”

Rai muttered. He couldn’t understand why he suddenly felt lonely in regard to his own parents.
But—still…it was a ridiculous emotion. Rai lifted himself off the

wall he was leaning against and looked at Konoe.

“Let’s go back to the inn. We’ll put together some preparations then train.”

“……all right.”

Once he confirmed Konoe’s reply, Rai stepped into the foot traffic, heading toward the inn.

They returned to the inn, put on their equipment, then headed to the vacant lot they had trained in before. The area was starting to get dark, but the crowds in the streets hadn’t died down. The two of them arrived at the vacant lot on the outskirts of town. Like before, they felt no other presence there. He looked at Konoe without a word. Konoe looked back up at him.

“Start with your song.”

Konoe nodded at Rai’s words then closed his eyes. If Konoe could sing a song that was better—better than the song he sang when they fought those twin cats, their battles would definitely go smoother than the ones before. However, they would need a “bond” for that. Konoe’s breathing steadied. The noise from the town faded. A white light gently wrapped around Konoe’s body. It was a song. He heard a gentle, warm melody. He reflexively gulped. However, with a bursting sound, the light disappeared. As if trying to capture the faint remaining light, Rai looked at his palm then clenched it.

“This song……”

Rai muttered as Konoe slowly shook his head, walking back up to him. Rai watched him silently.

“What?”

Konoe’s gaze seemed different from usual as he knit his brows.

“……it’s nothing. There were no problems. The song is over.”

Rai drew his sword and looked at the tip of it.

“If you have something to say, say it.”

Konoe continued. He seemed to want to know what his song just now was like. However, he didn’t have a way to give him a concrete answer concerning his song right now.

“I said there were no problems, didn’t I?”

Rai answered curtly, readying his sword.

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

“I was going to say that it was a stronger version of that basic song you sang the first time. I felt myself fill with a strength more powerful than last time.”

That wasn’t a lie. However, he didn’t tell him the truth either.

“……I guess I can’t sing any other songs.”

“It’s part of its attributes. It has its strengths and weaknesses. Besides, you certainly haven’t come up with any more songs than that, but that all depends on the Sanga’s own sense. Even if you gain more power, just swinging a sword around is pointless.”

Rai continued his words. But, Konoe was unsatisfied. He had now sung three songs all together. Even so, he seemed to think that wasn’t enough. He probably felt under pressure in front of the devils and Leaks.

“You don’t believe me?”

“That’s not it.”

He seemed to want to say something more, but instead, Rai thrust the tip of his sword toward Konoe.

“In that case, don’t think about such trivial things. Hurry up and draw your sword.”

Konoe’s gaze dropped sullenly to the ground, but he reluctantly drew his sword. He swiftly swung it, and Rai swung his over his

head. He felt the force of the impact through his sword. Konoe's sword skills were pretty average for a cat. However, he seemed to be getting better at deciding what he should do, and where he should go. If he didn't have a reason to use his sword, he would never get stronger. Even just the thought of wanting to become stronger could become a reason. Facing Konoe, he parried his sword, and dodged it. Each blow was light, but Konoe's sword had speed. When he evaded his sword, their gazes met for a moment. Konoe's eyes emitted a sparkling light. He was certain that his own eye was lit with that same sort of light. Or perhaps that was how he looked when he felt his sword. Rai repelled Konoe's sword. At the same time, Konoe lost his balance and fell on his back. Konoe's breathing was rough as he looked up at the sky. Rai sheathed his sword and looked down at Konoe.

"How long are you going to lay there? Let's go back."

Konoe slowly lifted himself up. He picked up his sword that had been flung away, and sheathed it, letting out a sigh. Rai watched him from the corner of his eye as he started to walk away from the vacant lot.

"Wait!"

Konoe chased after him. However, his gait was slightly unsteady. It was probably due to the sword training after singing, he must have been tired. Rai slowed down his pace slightly. Once they went out into the main street, they heard a loud laugh coming from somewhere. Even though there were less cats walking around in the hustle and bustle, there was no way this city would sleep during a festival. Several of the stalls were still open. The moment they tried to quickly get away from the street, there was a loud sound of a stall being smashed, and a cat who looked like the stall's owner fell out into the street on his behind. Next to him, his items had been thrown about, and broke with a loud sound. The contents scattered into the crowd. It was a pot full of his wares that had broken. In front of the stall owner that was thrown out into the street stood two cats. One of the cats was a dull yellow. The other cat was spotted. The stall owner scooted back still on his backside, trembling violently.

“Hey, don’t say you don’t have much food. Are you trying to ruin the festival mood?”

“You won’t die if you lose one or two of your wares. Take it easy.”

From the looks of their dingy clothes, they were probably bandits that came out from the forest to take advantage of the festival. They grabbed the stalls wares with both hands and kicked the stall owner as they let out a vulgar laugh. The onlookers surrounding the stall started to clamor.

“What? If any of y’all have a problem, come on out! I’ll kill you!”

The bandits raised their voices and glared at the crowd around them. At that moment, the onlookers got quiet and the circle shrunk back. They were uncomfortable.

“Huh, there’s no one? What the hell, how boring. Then I guess it’s just you who has a complaint.”

The bandit drew his sword and closed in on the stall owner, as if it to toy with him. Rai figured he was going to swing his sword down at the stall owner. Rai broke through the circle of onlookers and stepped in front of the bandits. The bandits looked back at Rai.

“Oh, what? You’re gunna do it?”

“Then do it!”

The bandits raised their voices. Rai carried both his long and short sword in each hand. The bandits each drew their own swords. However, their match was over in an instant.

“Gwah……”

“Uwh, guh……”

The bandits’ eyes opened wide with a groan as they fell forward. Rai looked down at the two fallen cats.

How stupid. Boring.

He couldn't stand opponents like this. Rai sheathed his swords, then headed toward Konoe who was watching him among the onlookers. He saw in the corner of his eye one of the bandits manage to lift themselves up with a strained face, and grab his sword that he dropped.

"Die!!"

The bandit threw the sword in his hand. Rai turned around and fended it off with his short sword. The sword was thrown at him with more force than he had imagined. It wouldn't have killed him at that speed though. He reflexively turned his face away. However, the sword changed direction in midair and the handle grazed the eye patch—over his right eye. Rai touched his eye patch with painfully slow movements. It was hot. The moment he was hit, he felt something snap. Before his eye was irresistible prey. The same as a small animal in the forest. All he had to do was wound it, and the warm blood would overflow. He lowered his right hand. He would wound his prey a little. He knew he had dug his claws into his prey's flesh. He punched him. There was scream. He was a toy. He swung down. He pinned his prey's hand to the ground. Next was his other hand. If he crushed both his hands, he wouldn't be able to resist anymore. If he did, he could cut apart that body to his heart's content. He swung his sword down over and over again. Missing his vitals. He'd let him die, draining his warmth until the final moment. Suddenly, he felt a strange blow. Something wrapped around his body. Even though he should have been aiming at his prey's vitals, his sword had struck something else. Then, there was a cat in front of him. Rai looked closely at the cat before his eyes. The can in front of him let go of his body. The cat then frowned as he thrust his right hand into his own hair. There was blood. There was blood on the fingertips that left his light brown hair. He reflexively grabbed that hand. The cat resisted. But he didn't care. He looked at the cat's fingertips. The blood on his fingers was a beautiful color. It was much more beautiful than the blood from his prey. It must be warm, and have a lovely taste. Rai licked the blood on those fingertips. At that moment, the cat in front of him pulled his arm away and swung his hand. He felt a blow across his face.

"What are you doing, snap out of it!"

He didn't know what was happening. Rai looked at the cat in front of him. He knew the name of this cat. It was Konoe. His Sanga. When he turned around there were two cats sprawled on the ground. One of them was curled up on the ground shaking as blood flowed out of him.

"Ow, ooow……."

The other bandit rushed over to the curled up cat, and picked him up.

"Y-You're a monster!! Damn it……!!"

The other bandit glared at him as he supported the wounded cat then ran away. Just what had happened? Rai pressed his hand against his eye patch. It didn't feel all that hot. It was always like this.

Always—

Konoe was looking straight at him. The on-looking cats started to go on their own ways.

"……let's go back to the inn."

Konoe said, almost as if he were commanding him. He didn't know what to say to Konoe who had watched this play out. He reflexively turned his face away. He then muttered quietly.

"……sorry."

He started to walk, continuing to look away, Konoe following after him. The two of them didn't speak to each other. Halfway through the main street, they came across a group in costume. Being illuminated by the torches around the town, the costumed cats looked as though they were floating, it made a strange sight. Rai and Konoe both stopped and waited for the procession of at least ten cats to go by. At the same time, a smell grazed his nose. Konoe also seemed to have noticed the same smell.

"What……is that smell?"

Konoe who had been quiet until then, opened his mouth. Rai pointed toward a stall along the street, and jerked his chin toward it.

“It’s probably that.”

The source of the smell was incense used to attract customers. A suspicious looking old cat smiled up at them as he lined up small cloth bags of incense. When Konoe went up to the stall, he let out a long sigh. Rai had no choice but to follow after him. It wasn’t a bad smell. Actually, it was a comforting smell. It was a charmingly sweet smell. It was probably high grade silver vine. Silver vine was a plant with a component that intoxicated cats that has existed since the time of the “two sticks”. Since it can intoxicate cats, its use is regulated by the feudal lord, and was restricted. Many of the trees were cut down, and you could only find alcohol laced with silver vine powder on the market. It’s only a tiny amount, but it’s enough to intoxicate. To acquire some of a high quality, it would cost quite a bit of money. On the other hand, if it was cheap or low quality, it would result in a bad trip that was closer to an aphrodisiac. *Aphrodisiac*—come to think of it, Antou was a festival around mating season. Luckily, Rai wasn’t experiencing any of the symptoms. Konoe stuck his hand into the hemp bag he was carrying. He was going to buy some incense.

“Don’t. You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into at a shop that does business at this hour.”

The stall owner gave him an annoyed look. Konoe stopped his hand, and thought for a moment. But, in the end, he couldn’t resist his impulses.

“Thanks for your business.”

Konoe took out some small coins from his bag and the old man cheerfully handed over the small bag.

“You don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Rai knit his brows.

“But it smells good. See?”

“Stop.”

He turned his face away from the small bag Konoe held out towards him. The fragrance stirred in his body. He continued to walk along with Konoe who was now in a good mood. As he was about to turn left down the street toward the inn, Konoe stopped.

“Let’s keep going straight.”

“Straight? The inn is to the left.”

“Since we’re out already, we might as well make another stop.”

Konoe’s footsteps that earlier were full of fatigue, were now light.

“……are you all right?”

“Why?”

He had asked Konoe with a sigh, but Konoe answered back with puzzled look. Konoe appeared to be a little intoxicated. He felt nervous leaving Konoe in this state. Rai followed after Konoe who started to walk off. Certainly, this path led to—.

“Do you have plans or something?”

Konoe turned toward him as he heard the sound of a babbling brook far off in the distance. There were less buildings around, and a lonely atmosphere arose.

“It’s a roundabout detour, but if we keep going down this path, we’ll end up in front of the inn.”

“Let’s walk along the river.”

Rai replied, and Konoe lifted his tail as he walked toward the sound of water. There were no torches that decorated the town along the dark road, halfway through there was a river flowing.

“You like water?”

“I don’t especially like it. Since you hate fire, does that mean you like water?”

“No, not really.”

Konoe answered, purring. He really did seem to be in a good mood. Rai could feel the presence of cats in the surrounding grass, and looked around. *So it really was that*, Rai narrowed his eye. He wasn’t sure if it was coming from the small bag Konoe had put away in his hemp bag, or if it was coming from the grass around them. The fragrance enveloped Rai’s body. Konoe turned toward Rai. He could tell the corner of his eyes were a little bloodshot.

“……hey.”

He called out to Konoe who approached him. He looked at his face at close range.

“Could it be, you’re also…?”

He guessed his own face was flush from Konoe’s question.

“I may be catching a cold……”

Konoe didn’t seem to understand the situation at all, as he touched his ears to check his temperature.

“You really are a stupid cat. On top of that, idiotic. Don’t you hear that?”

Konoe pricked up his ears. The presence of cats—the rustling of clothes, hurried breath, voices. The sound of the bodies of cats on top of each other. There were probably cats in heat over there.

“……!”

Konoe gasped. His flushed face became even more red.

“That incense. The smell of it is all around.”

“Why is the smell so strong……”

“Those cats have some too. There’s probably some low quality silver vine mixed in it.”

Rai frowned. It was difficult to discern the silver vine quality.

“But, it doesn’t smell like the one they were burning at the stall at all.”

Konoe muttered with his head lowered.

“That was probably to lure in customers. Normal cats wouldn’t be able to tell the difference in quality. That’s what happens to cats who are fooled. Though, there are also cats who know, and bought it for that purpose.”

Konoe’s ears and tail drooped low. It was a child’s reaction. Konoe’s youth was even more apparent in the way he stole several glances toward the two cats as they passed by. Suddenly, he wanted to touch that childishness. He reached out toward Konoe who still had his head lowered confused. He grasped his shoulder, and pulled him closer. This was definitely because of that smell. The smell that distorted his reason.

“What……?”

“Be quiet.”

Konoe’s face was against his shoulder as Rai embraced him. His breath hit him. Konoe’s body was hot. It was probably just as hot as his own. Konoe squirmed in his arms.

“Wait, just wait, let go……!”

“I said, be quiet.”

He whispered, then licked up Konoe’s ear. It tasted just a little like sweat. You could check a cat’s temperature by touching their ears. It was above all else a sensitive area. Perhaps a young cat like him had never had something like this done to him before. Rai wondered about that as he toyed with Konoe’s ear. He had experienced a need to breed several times, but he had never felt like touching someone as strongly as this before. Therefore, he never

thought his libido was all that strong, but—no, this was that incense's fault. He shouldn't be this strongly attracted Konoe. That's what he tried to tell himself.

"……what are you doing……!?"

He traced his tongue along his ear. Aside from the incense, Konoe emitted his own scent. It was a comforting smell. Konoe shook his head as if that tickling feeling wasn't enough. He embraced him, and dragged him into the thicket.

"…..hey, seriously, what are you doing……!!??"

Konoe raised his voice in protest. As he pushed Konoe's body against the trunk of a tree in the middle of the thicket, Rai wondered why his head was cool, even though his body was so hot. What was Konoe feeling?"

"……it's your fault."

He whispered into his ear. He shouldn't be in heat. This was that incense's fault. It was Konoe's fault for buying the incense.

"Wh……why……?"

He asked Rai. He couldn't stop. He wanted to touch Konoe even more. His breath was labored. Even when he was crossing swords with someone, his breathing wasn't this strained.

"……damn it."

Rai clicked his tongue a bit before he took a small bite of the tip of Konoe's ear. Konoe's body shook in surprise. He stuck his tongue inside his ear. The smell became stronger. That was Konoe's scent. That smell overlapped with the smell of the incense.

"…..uwh……"

Konoe ducked his head, trying to shrink back, pushing the back of his head against the tree. At times, he would helplessly try to resist, but he pinned Konoe's arms to the tree. He then put Konoe's whole ear into his mouth.

"……ah……"

Konoe let out a seductive voice. He didn't think a voice like that could come from a mouth that usually only spoke to him in annoyance. He slowly pulled the ear out from his mouth between his lips.

"Stop……ngh……kh!"

Konoe looked up at the sky as if to gasp for air. He looked into his eyes. Konoe's eyes were glossed over, and wavering. He was in heat. Or maybe something else.

"I told you not to buy it."

Rai said as he held back his labored breathing.

"You knew this would happen……?"

"No. I said don't get involved with things you know nothing about."

That was the truth. He wasn't being overly cautious.

"It's too late now."

Konoe replied. He knew that. That's why—.

"……that's why you need to take responsibility."

He said before stealing Konoe's lips.

"…..kh."

Konoe gasped, and his body tensed. He switched angles, indulging in the kiss. It was hot. He didn't know whether it was his own body heat or Konoe's. When he tried to slip the tip of his tongue into Konoe's mouth, and nudge at his fangs, Konoe turned away and refused the kiss.

"How……can someone like you become like this?"

Konoe strained to say, still close to him.

“What do you mean?”

“Since you’re always so cold.”

“I’m not some almighty being. I’m just a cat in both flesh and blood. It’s difficult to go against random, or rather, instinctual desires that I was forced into.”

It was a dormant desire to begin with, but it was just the incense that dragged it out of him.

“……but, we’re male. I am, and you too.”

It was a stupid remark. There weren’t many cats in Shisa that *didn’t* indulge in same-sex intercourse. Though, he supposed coming from a small village that differed from Ransen, same-sex relationships may have been considered taboo. There were certainly cats that resisted. There were also cats that preferred sex purely for pleasure rather than to produce offspring. But…

“So what?”

“……huh?”

Konoe lifted his face in surprise.

“You should want to feel pleasure no matter who your partner is.”

“Then anyone will do, huh.”

That wasn’t what he had meant to say, but Konoe’s reaction was tinged with disappointment.

“Why do you think that?”

“Because, just now……”

He interrupted Konoe’s words.

“How feminine. If you don’t like it, then bite me and run away.”

“……kh.”

Konoe furrowed his brow. From tightly pursed lips, he bit the tip of Rai's nose determinedly. It wasn't serious, more like a play bite, a single blow. However, that did nothing but heat up Rai's body at that moment. Konoe glared at him. Rai pulled his face away for a moment, then drew his lips close to Konoe's.

"Then I guess we'll end it here."

The fragrance of the incense coming from Konoe's bag grazed against his nose. Konoe bit Rai's lip. A faint pleasure arose from the pain where Konoe had bit him softly. Rai also bit Konoe's lip. They both sucked on each other's lips, and the moment they tried to bite down, their fangs clashed. For a short moment, Rai and Konoe stopped moving. The vibration echoing directly through their bones pulled them back to reality. It wasn't clear which of them had pulled away. The cold night air, and the babbling of the river cooled their heads. He had certainly felt that he wanted to touch Konoe for a brief moment. However, he wasn't sure if that was because of the incense, being in heat, or something else entirely.

"……this joke went on far too long."

Rai muttered as he sighed. Konoe didn't reply.

"Let's go back."

Rai said, then without looking at Konoe started to walk.

"……all right."

He heard Konoe reply quietly. Still feeling awkward, they returned to the inn and slipped into their own beds.

He was probably still feeling the remaining effects of the incense, since he could feel a faint heat from the core of his body. More than the remaining scent from the aphrodisiac, it was like he had a fever from a minor cold. He also felt faint chills. It was probably extremely low quality silver vine. Rai looked at Konoe who was wrapped up in his blanket with his back turned to him. He felt as though Konoe's back was rejecting him. He was probably also tired from their training, after a while Konoe's shoulders started to move

steadily. He seemed to be asleep. Rai lifted himself up, and looked out the window as he sat on the bed. It had become rather late at night before he knew it. The moon was already starting to set. Rai slowly filled his lungs with the night air. The dim heat in the center of his head faded slightly. He ruminated over the events of today. He kissed Konoe—then there was that dispute with the bandits. He wasn't actually sure if he could blame all of that on the incense. He figured he could make the excuse of his nerves becoming unusually worked up when he fought with the bandits. There was that feeling when he punched him, and pierced his sword through him. His screams. If Konoe hadn't stopped him, he might have killed that cat. The space was closing in on him. He couldn't control himself. It was like an illness advancing on him. Rai lowered his eyes, sighing. He watched both his hands closely. He still felt uncomfortable. At this rate he would certainly lose control of his consciousness. Due to that, he wasn't sure what he should do. He had no other way than to force himself to endure it. For that reason, he wanted more strength. The tougher he was, the less his heart and body would be swayed by madness. The moment he clenched his slightly sweaty palms, a shadow suddenly went by his window. His gaze followed it. He was there—the devil clad in black wrapped in a green light. It was Froud.

"……bastard……"

Rai growled at Froud as he bared his fangs.

"Shhh."

Froud put his index finger to his lips, and jerked his chin bellow him. He was probably telling him to go outside. Froud waved his hand and disappeared from the window. Rai grabbed his equipment. Basically, Rai didn't trust the devils. Especially Froud with his smoothness, he was eerie. He glanced at Konoe. The blanket he was wrapped up in was moving up and down steadily. He hadn't woken up. He most likely wouldn't go looking for him tonight if he woke up and was gone. Rai put his hand on the window sill and jumped through it. When he landed in the narrow alley, he heard the sound of unenthusiastic clapping. Froud was leaning against a tree in the direction of the sound.

“Cats really are agile.”

“……what do you want?”

“Oh no, it’s nothing important.”

Froud smile spread wide into a distorted smile, his facial movements made him uncertain of his expression. Since his face was hidden by a mask, he wasn’t really sure what sort of face he was making.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to listen to anyone else.”

“Hurry up and speak.”

Rai drew his long sword, and thrust the tip of it toward Froud’s throat. Froud shrugged his shoulders, letting out a sigh.

“You have some nerve going against a devil, even as a joke. Well, whatever. I don’t hate that sort of thing either. Now then, as you wish, I’ll speed things up……fufu.”

Froud moved the tip of his sword away with his index finger, and tilted his head amused.

“……hurry up.”

“Fufu……actually, I saw it.”

“What?”

“Your madness.”

He gasped reflexively. Froud’s mouth distorted into a happy smile.

“It seems fun. Was it fun? I must have been.”

“……what are you talking about?”

He gripped the handle of the sword.

“Even though I *should* tell you, doesn’t mean I will.”

“……kh, bastard!”

He swung the sword he had thrust at him, and aimed for Froud’s throat. However, he swiftly dodged it, floating into the air. He crossed his arms in a nonchalant manner.

“You should be more upfront.”

“Shut up.”

Rai told him as he glared at Froud.

“Well, while it’s regrettable, I do agree with Verg. You cats really are like your human ancestors.”

Froud turned toward the sky, shaking his head exaggeratedly.

“The way you all lie, really is just like them. You all inherited something so pointless.”

“What……were you talking about earlier!?”

Rai crouched down low, aimed at Froud’s head, and leapt. However, the sword he swung only cut the air. Froud kicked off the trunk of a tree using the momentum to jump even higher up.

“Get down!”

“No matter what you say, I didn’t come here to fight. Well, I’d be happy if you heard me out for just a little longer.”

Froud said completely composed as he looked down at Rai.

“I have no interested in your nonsense.”

“Now, now, it’s just for a moment. You should be more honest, like us.”

“You enjoy that mask that hates their own madness, don’t you? And then, that hatred you feel towards yourself is unbearable. Am I wrong? White kitty-chan?”

“……shut up!”

He growled at Froud. His breath was erratic. His heart hurt. His heartbeat and vision blurred. Froud's words were like a curse.

"You lie about your emotions. Because of that, you needlessly suffer more and more. You should just admit it."

Once he spoke, Froud suddenly crouched down and jumped midair, rushing toward Rai. He immediately jumped back, but he was pursued. Froud's face drew near to him. His lips were contorted into a smile. The moment he tried to bring strength into his knees to back away, his ears were whispered into.

"You love killing."

His heart leapt. Froud was smiling in front of him. His eyes hidden by his mask were certainly watching him.

"……bastard!"

He yelled. A growl welled up in his throat. Rai tossed his sword away and unleased his claws. Froud leaped away, and once again floated into the air.

"One day you'll realize it. No, one day you won't be able to hold back. When that happens……what will you do? Your lies will blind you. If you're honest, you'll be set free. Think about it."

Rai let out a growl toward the sky.

"I won't tell anyone about this. That's why you should also keep to your agreement. Our collaboration won't be over until we find Leaks. Now then, good night. White kitty-chan."

Froud instantly climbed higher in the sky, then twirled. He then suddenly disappeared.

"Wait!"

He knew he couldn't go after him. But he couldn't just let him go. He fell to his knees and dug his drawn claws into the ground. Dirt flew.

“……he’s……screwing with me……!”

His white tail was stiff and puffed out. Rai took a deep breath, closing his eyes to try and calm down. It had been a while since he had gotten so angry, he lost control of himself. Froud was watching him. Just as he thought, he couldn’t trust the devils. Having a shortcut to reach Leaks was no reason to work with them. However, now it was like Froud was grasping his weaknesses. Konoe suspected something, but other than him, no one should know. No, there was someone else who knew about his other self, but he most likely wouldn’t interfere. Rai opened his closed eyes, picked up his discarded sword, and gripped the handle. He wanted more strength. A strength that destroyed his self-control, the restlessness of his heart, and even all of his emotions. Stronger than what he had thought earlier on top of his bed. He sheathed his sword and lifted his face. The sky was still dark, night was breaking. That darkness was reflected in Rai’s cold blue eye as he turned on his heel toward the inn. The wind quietly blowing by shook his tail, and masked his profile with silver hair.

Lamento Beyond the Void Expiatio (Tomoko Kanemaki/N＋C) Chapter 5

Caput 5

He awoke that morning after not getting much sleep. His eyes narrowed as a fever burned in the core of his body. Konoe was still asleep. He smelled Konoe's scent wafting faintly through the room.

It couldn't be.

He considered the date as he averted his gaze from Konoe's back, looking toward the window. The sky was clear after the end of the festival. It was also a special season for cats. Rai shook off his fever and Konoe's scent as he got up to get dressed. He planned on going to a bar today as well.

"……you're up early."

Konoe who seemed to finally be awake spoke to him.

"What are we doing today?"

"Going to a bar."

"A bar?"

"Yes."

Rai answered, looking out the window. Konoe slowly started to get dressed beside him.

"Hurry and get ready. I told you before, didn't I? You can acquire any information you want from the bars in back alleys."

"What kind of information? About Leaks?"

Rai didn't answer. They certainly needed information about Leaks. However, he had other reasons he frequented those bars.

"Let's go."

Rai put on his coat and started to walk away.

"Wa……wait!"

Konoe frantically tried to put on his boots, but tumbled to the floor before he was able to.

"……stupid cat."

"It's because you rushed me."

Konoe pouted gloomily. Rai held out his hand to him.

"Here."

"What?"

Konoe glared up at him.

"It's fine, just hurry up and stand."

With an air of reluctance, Konoe took his hand and stood up. Suddenly, Rai sensed Konoe's scent once again.

Aah, I knew it—.

Rai looked at Konoe.

"What?"

Konoe asked suspiciously as he shook off Rai's hand. Somehow, Konoe didn't seem to be aware of the condition of his own body.

"Hurry up."

Rai leaned against the wall, looking down at Konoe. He sat back down on the floor, putting on his boots properly before standing back up. He grasped his coat in his hand.

“Let’s go.”

Rai opened the door then left the room.

The back alleys were noticeably dimmer than the main street, with much dirtier walls and pathways. Even the cats loitering in them looked worse. The bar they were headed to was around that corner. Once they entered, Konoe coughed a bit.

“What’s wrong?”

Rai turned around to see Konoe frowning.

“……the air is smokey.”

“It’s just that sort of place, bear with it.”

Rai once again headed into the bar. In the center of it sat the usual cat next to the counter. The cat clad in black clothes from head to tail was a well-known informant. He had never seen his face before, but there was no need to see his face to gather information.

“Wait here.”

“Huh?”

Rai told Konoe before immediately approaching the informant.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Rai spoke to the informant who nodded back slightly. Without waiting for Rai to ask him anything, he began to speak.

“The female who knows what you want to know is in a brothel. Her name is Mana.”

What he wanted to know—was nothing other than about the demon that stole his right eye.

“Which brothel?”

“You should be familiar with the largest one around here, right?”

That was all the informant had to say. Rai took out some coins from his bag and placed them on the table. That was his fee for the information. He gave him double the going rate. He then left the table and returned to Konoe.

“I’m finished with my business here. Let’s go.”

Konoe looked surprised when spoken to.

“Huh……hey.”

The brothels prostitutes were in yesterday weren’t always the ones they were in today. Rai suddenly quickened his pace. They exited the bar then continued on through the back alley. Konoe followed behind him.

“Where are we going?”

He heard a voice behind him, but didn’t answer. He felt a twinge of uneasiness. He was wondering if it was such a good idea to bring Konoe along with him. He wondered if it was all right to get Konoe involved in a battle he was pursuing just for himself, even though they were paired together. He only planned to hear what that prostitute had to say for today. Rai stopped and turned to Konoe. His breathing was slightly elevated. He once again smelled Konoe’s scent. He felt awkward taking him to a brothel during this season and in this condition.

“Go back to the inn before me.”

When he told him that, Konoe looked at him with an unusually dumbfounded expression.

“……hey, you……”

Konoe said annoyed.

“I’ll tell you about it later.”

He had meant that with the utmost sincerity, but…

“Of course you will. But that’s not what I meant……”

“It’s fine, just go.”

When he interrupted Konoe’s words, an obviously angry expression came across his face. He turned away from Rai and ran off. Konoe’s angry reaction was childish as usual, but he didn’t really understand why he was so upset. Rai let out a small sigh. He then once again started to walk.

“Oh my, he left.”

He lifted his face towards the voice above his head. It was Froud, floating between the dirty walls. His arms were crossed as he looked down at him with a faint smile.

“……you…what do you want?”

“Nothing. I happened to see you two leave. So I was just observing a little.”

Froud lowered himself into the alley with his arms still crossed. Rai reflexively reached for his long sword.

“You seem to be in a hurry, but why is that exactly? Are you chasing after something? You’re gathering information, I see, perhaps about…”

Froud stopped his words, seemingly to think, as he put a hand to his mouth and tilted his head.

“An old scar, or something……about that gouged right eye?”

He took in sharp breath. How did he know about that? Something like a dark unpleasantness overflowed from his chest. Rai drew his long sword from its sheath.

“……bastard……”

“How do I know about that? That’s a story from my world. We have our own ways to gather information. Various ways.”

Froud flashed a toothy smile as if he were enjoying Rai’s apprehension.

“By the way……why are you so desperate to chase after it? Is it because it left such a deep scar when it stole your eye, along with your pride? Is that really all it is?”

“……what are you trying to say?”

“I know why. I know—I can smell what’s sleeping inside of you.”

With his face turned upward, Froud slowly twirled in midair.

“Anger? Hatred? No, no, nothing like that. It’s not anything so lukewarm. Right, that’s it—are you familiar with the word *madness*?”

His words mixed with laughter directed towards him dyed his vision green.

Not red—*green*.

He was instantly overcome by an intense impulse to throw up. Rai threw his sword aside and bared his fangs. Froud grinned cheerfully, shaking his head left and right. The swaying green hair, and the green in his vision overlapped, their hue beating harshly against his retina.

“Now, now. There’s no way you can win against the opponent you’re chasing. You need to be more honest. Hey, why are you unable to do that?”

Froud spread his arms with exaggerated movements, and shrugged.

“Even though you’ve already become like this, why do you still try to hide it? Whether it’s cats, or humans, I seriously don’t understand any of you at all. Do you really enjoy telling lies that much? Are lies really that comforting?”

“……shut up!”

Rai aimed his words at Froud as he rushed toward him, swinging his extended claws. They cut through the air. Froud avoided those claws, and gracefully floated into the sky.

“Fufufu, just a little longer, okay? A little……longer.”

Froud muttered satisfied before disappearing. Rai glared at the sky Froud had disappeared from. The remaining urges left in his body ached. It ached together with his incredibly intense heartbeat echoing through him. He felt a terrible discomfort similar to nausea. He picked up his discarded sword, thinking to himself as he sheathed it. Froud certainly knew about everything. More than know, he seemed to be enjoying the spectacle of him struggling through it. This was the first time he felt his blood stir like this outside of battle. This was also the first time his consciousness had been dragged out.
His other consciousness.
Rai impulsively struck the wall. Why was he so worked up over Froud’s words? He felt disgusted just by Froud’s existence. His hair stood on end. Suddenly a pain like heat ran through his right eye. Rai reflexively held his breath.

“……guh……kh.”

It was a sharp, intense pain as if it were being bored into that same spot for a second time. He fell to his knees, his trembling hand pressed against his eye patch. Sweat clung to his forehead. He endured the chills that went through his body next. His vision flickered blue.

“……damn it.”

He clenched his teeth from the pain tormenting all of his nerves, putting a hand against the wall to stand up. Using the wall to help him at times with the unending pain, Rai continued through the alley. He steadied his breathing. At this rate, it would consume him.

The pain of his right eye—and his own madness.

He saw a cat arguing with someone about something ahead of him. It was Konoe. He could tell that the pain in his right eye was receding slightly. Konoe, who had fallen onto the ground, had his tail grasped by a gray cat. He must have bumped into that bigger guy. However, Konoe was a young cat, and it was mating season. It was more than possible that he had gotten mixed up in some

unnecessary trouble. Rai drew his sword, kicked off the ground, and rushed toward them. He pushed the blade of his long sword against the gray cat's neck.

"Stop right there. If you don't want your throat slit that is."

Konoe turned around with a surprised look on his face.

"That's my partner. Hurry up and let him go."

"Damn it. Then put a leash on him, and make sure it's tight."

The gray cat backed away then ran off. When Konoe tried to lift himself up, he staggered and fell to the ground on his hands and knees. Rai grasped Konoe's arm, and pulled him to his feet. This was the second time today. Konoe looked at him annoyed. His scent grazed his nose. Rai let out a sigh as if to dispel the heat trapped in his body before he spoke.

"……stupid cat. I take my eyes off you for one second, and I never know what mess you're going to get into."

Konoe didn't answer.

"What were you doing anyway?"

"……who cares."

"Are you kidding me?"

Konoe's childish response annoyed him. Even so, the pain in his right eye was fading.

"Maybe you should ask yourself that."

"What are you talking about?"

"……hey, you."

Konoe looked at Rai. He then let out a sigh as if he had been holding something inside.

"Enough already. All you do is order me around, and then you

don't even explain yourself. You just use me like it's okay. Am I wrong? You do whatever you want, so I'm just doing whatever *I* want too. Why do I have to be blamed for that?"

Konoe looked right at Rai as he spoke quickly. He didn't think Konoe felt that way. Even so, he had a feeling Konoe was annoyed just a little more than usual. Perhaps because he was in heat. Rai sighed then spoke.

"No. I'm just telling you to think more before you act."

"And I'm just acting on my own decisions."

"You have some nerve saying all that after what just happened."

"Whatever, it's my body. How I treat it is none of your business."

"Now you're just arguing to argue."

"No I'm not. Then what about you……"

Their ridiculous argument ended when Konoe got quiet. He lowered his ears as if he were hesitating about something, looking down at the ground. He seemed to have started to cool down a bit. Rai also felt his worked up nerves start to cool. He was agitated because his tail had been pulled, and ended up criticizing him in that harsh tone. It was possible that Konoe got angry when he told him to go home without offering any explanation as to why he had him to go to the bar with him in the first place. Perhaps Konoe had always felt this way. Rai slowly opened his mouth.

"The cat I was talking to at the bar was an informant I had been looking for. I was finally able to catch him from a rumor I heard about him being in Ransen. That informant had the information I wanted."

"Information?"

Konoe asked back. Explaining every little thing was becoming a pain. Konoe probably wouldn't understand with just that though.

"Actually, that informant didn't know himself, but told me about

a cat who knows more details. At a brothel."

"So why didn't you take me with you?"

"I thought it would be easier if I pretended to be a customer by myself. Besides, now I have to waste time explaining everything to you. That's all."

Konoe lowered his head.

"Are you satisfied?"

Rai asked before he turned around, starting to walk away. He was getting a late start because of Froud and Konoe.

"Wait a sec."

Konoe frantically chased after him.

"Where are you going now?"

"To the brothel."

Rai sped up his pace. Konoe's scent was bothering him. If possible, he'd like to keep his distance.

"……how did you know where I was?"

Konoe called out from behind him.

"You weren't that far from where we parted. Of course I would find you. If I hadn't gone by, something interesting would have happened to you."

"Something interesting?"

"After they thoroughly torment you, they'll kill you and throw you out into the forest, you'll be torn apart then sold to the tribes in the starving areas for an absurd amount as food. Young fresh meat goes for a high price."

Rai told him indifferently without turning around.

“Considering the season, it would be suicide.”

He referred to mating season ominously. However, Konoe didn’t react much. Could it be he didn’t know about mating season? It was possible since Konoe was young, but he couldn’t believe it.
Rai stopped his feet. In front of them was a building that appeared to be a two-stick remain. There was no other brothel older than the one there. It was a strange building made of wood and stone with both pointed and rounded roofs.

“Let’s go.”

Rai continued walking until he reached the front door. When he knocked, a small window in the door opened. The eyes of a cat peeked out from there.

“Who’s there?”

“Hinomiya.”

That was the password. It was a password that every cat of the underbelly of the town knew to get into that brothel. The small window closed, and there was the sound of the door being unlocked. It opened slowly. The view on the other side of the door was red. The interior was illuminated by red lights coming from the glass lamps they used. The carpet and furniture were also red. In the middle of the spacious room was a staircase that continued on to the second floor. Konoe looked around nervously, perhaps uneasy in this red scenery. The cat that closed the door behind them came towards them as he rubbed his hands together. He had an obviously fake smile, but all the managers of brothels everywhere were the same.

“Welcome, welcome. This is……your companion?”

“That’s right.”

The manager looked at Konoe as if he were estimating his worth.

“He doesn’t look like he’s old enough to have done this sort of erotic play yet……ah, don’t tell me you want a threesome, no wait, perhaps a foursome, no, no, perhaps a five……”

“Mana.”

Rai said interrupting the manager. He rubbed his hands together harder, nodding repeatedly.

“Yes, yes. Mana, then. She’s free at the moment. Her room is on the second floor to the left. Pay the fee afterwards. Well then, please head to the second floor.”

Rai turned away from the manager, and headed towards the stairs. He sensed Konoe was following behind him a little frantically, he then headed to the door at the end of the left hall. The second floor was full of red, the same as first. Rai abruptly pushed the door open.

“Kya, wait! Couldn’t you have at least knocked!? I don’t care what sort of customer you are……”

A female’s shrill voice resounded back at them. The room’s interior was rather plain. The light flowing from the lamp was a normal color, and placed inside was a larger than average bed. A female cat stood in the center of the room. That female must have been Mana. Her tail was somewhat puffed out, seemingly upset. There was a large scar across her cheek. Konoe next to him stared at Mana in front of them. This must have been the first time this guy had seen a young female cat.

“Who’s that behind you? A kid? Your little brother?”

“……no.”

“Well, I don’t really care if you brought a kid or whatever. But, you have some bad tastes.”

Mana said with a sharp tone. A brothel was a place for male cats to indulge in their pleasures after all. Two male cats purchasing one female cat was certainly as Mana said, in bad taste. However, he didn’t come to have sex with this female cat.

“I don’t have business with you personally.”

“Huh?”

Mana asked jerking her chin up with a frown on her face, and her arms crossed.

“I want to ask you something. I’ll reward you double. I’ll keep coming until you talk.”

Rai said indifferently.

“Stop joking around. Someone like you coming every day would just disrupt business. And don’t call it a reward. It gives me the creeps.”

“If you talk, I’ll never come here again.”

Mana looked at Rai with a surprised expression. However, eventually she let out a long sigh as she sat down in a chair.

“Got it. You’re so persistent. All I have to do is talk, right? In exchange, you’ll give me double my fee, and never come here again.”

“Of course.”

Rai answered then checked on Konoe for only a moment. He was standing next to Rai, unable to relax. Rai was still somewhat unsure if Konoe should hear what she had to say.

“So, what do you want to know?”

Rai looked away from Mana briefly then spoke his business.

“There was a demon terrorizing your village. It was given young females as offerings, right?”

“Aah, so that’s what you want to talk about. That’s right. I was one of them. This is from then. Don’t you think it’s just awful? On a maiden’s face and everything. But, since someone drove that monster away before it could eat me, I was able to go home alive.”

Mana stroked the scar on her right cheek. The one she spoke of who fought off that thing before she was eaten was him, and Mana was that female cat from that time. He never would have guessed

she was that scared, trembling female he saw standing there. Rai continued to question her as he hid the truth.

“Anything is fine. Tell me everything you remember.”

“Even if you tell me that……I couldn’t help being afraid, so I don’t really *want* to remember it……”

Mana put a hand to her chin deep in thought. He could vaguely understand what meaning those memories of being a sacrifice had for this female. Of course she wouldn’t want to remember them. However, Mana was relatively calm. Rai continued his words.

“That demon didn’t appear in that village. The place where sacrifices gathered was elsewhere, right?”

Mana lifted her face, she must have remembered something.

“Now that you mention it, that’s right. It was.”

“Do you remember where?”

Rai immediately asked.

“Do you know the Mirror Lake? I think it’s definitely somewhere in the northern forests, towards the east end. I feel like it was somewhere around there. In a cave.”

The location was definitely a cave. However, it didn’t seem like Mana knew any more than he did.

“……I see. Do you remember anything else?”

“Nothing. The sacrifices were blindfolded in the cave. That’s why I don’t remember anything else. All I felt was fear and that I wanted to run away.”

Mana shook her head left and right. Rai brought out the cloth bag he was carrying, took out some coins, and casually set them at the edge of the dresser. It was twice her fee. He didn’t think that was enough compensation for this female that was left trembling in that cave.

“Let’s go.”

Rai said to Konoe before turning on his heel. However, Konoe was sitting on the floor as if his knees had given out.

“What’s wrong?”

“……nothing.”

Konoe answered his question somewhat annoyed. There was no way it was nothing. Konoe’s breath was labored. His eyes were glossy.

“Huh? This kid……”

Mana gave Konoe a strange look, her lips then formed into a smile.

“……aah, I see. So that’s it.”

Mana seemed to notice something unnecessary. She let out a chuckle.

“What, saying you don’t want anything during this season, even though you’re the same too, right? Being on the same wave length is promising, isn’t it?”

“……shut up.”

He was annoyed that she was able to guess correctly about what he had been feeling since last night. Konoe who didn’t seem to understand at all sank to the floor with a hand against his chest through his clothes.

“You can glare and get angry all you want, but he’s in bad shape right now. You can’t convince me otherwise.”

Mana stood up, then crouched down next to Konoe. She gently stroked Konoe’s lowered chin.

“Is this your first time? There, there. Poor thing, even your tail is this fluffy. Tell that eye patch guy to hurry up and make you feel

better.”

Konoe looked at Rai as if he couldn’t understand what Mana was telling him at all.

“You still have time, so go ahead. Use the room.”

Mana turned to Rai, smiling widely.

“I don’t really mind. You paid double anyway. I’ve just finished using it earlier.”

Mana pat Konoe’s head then stood up. She put a hand to the door.

“I’ll tell the manager. See you, and take your time～”

With a wide smile, and a flick of her tail, Mana disappeared behind the door. Rai looked at Konoe who was still sitting on the floor. All that echoed through the room was Konoe’s rough breathing. There certainly was some truth to what Mana was saying. He doubt Konoe would be able to walk in his current state. It would be troublesome trying to carry him back to the inn emitting the scent of the heat going through his entire body—but more than that, it would actually be impossible. It was the same as when he was on the side of the street earlier. He was close to giving up then too.

Even so…

Rai let out a sigh as he approached the sitting Konoe. He was immediately assaulted by Konoe’s scent.

“Can you walk?”

Konoe nodded weakly. He grabbed his arm. He had grabbed Konoe by the arm three times today. Rai pulled him to his feet. He then led him to the bed in the middle of the room.

“Rest for a bit.”

Konoe obediently sat on the bed at Rai’s words. Perhaps feeling

relaxed on the soft bed, Konoe let out a long sigh. He then laid down. He wasn't on his guard at all. Konoe really didn't get it. He looked at him as he continued to stand by the bed. Konoe suddenly lifted his face and looked at Rai. He must have felt uncomfortable with Rai watching him. He spoke.

"……what."

"You seriously don't know?"

Rai asked astounded.

"What?"

Konoe asked back with a rough sigh.

"The number of cats walking around outside was less than usual today, right?"

Konoe gave him a puzzled look.

"……because it's mating season."

"Huh?"

He could tell from the words he asked back that Konoe knew less than he expected.

"The season starts right before winter, it started maybe the day before yesterday, but it happens twice a year. It's different for everyone, but the waves are especially high today. The cats that don't want to be forced to fall victim to it, refrain from going outside."

Konoe looked surprised as he listened to his explanation.

"They didn't teach you that in your village? Usually people start around your age."

He was a little surprised that Konoe really didn't know anything about being in heat. Just what sort of life did Konoe have in Karou?

“You said the waves are high today, but not everyone is going to be in heat, right?”

Konoe really didn’t seem to know anything about being heat, about his own actions—or about their compatibility.

“I told you it’s different for everyone. Then there’s compatibility.”

“Compatibility?”

“For example, lovers who are compatible wouldn’t be able to resist. Sometimes they just have to be on the same wave length though.”

He had heard that even male cats can go into heat with the same sex if they’re compatible enough. That’s why even though he didn’t hold any special feelings for Konoe, he wanted to touch him more than anything right now. Was this just lust, or something else? They were a pair, their bond strengthened by a song, and since their bond was strengthened, he figured being joined physically wouldn’t be all that unusual. However, was that really it? Wasn’t this just lust?

“If there’s a cat on the same wave length nearby, they’ll both feel their heat strongly.”

Rai told him as he sat on the bed. Being near him seemed to make Konoe’s scent standout even more. That scent smelled nothing but sweet. He touched Konoe’s tail gently. He gasped.

“……you too?”

Konoe asked confused.

“Are you in pain?”

Rai asked back without answering his question. Konoe nodded a little.

“I’m sure you already know, but there’s a way to feel better.”

Rai told him. He felt lost again. This wasn’t his first mating

season. However, he had never lusted after a particular person like this before. He also wasn't sure if it was right to do this sort of thing with Konoe who was completely new to it all. Konoe looked at him with wavering eyes. If he was going to resist, it was better to just wait until this heat dispersed on its own. However—Konoe didn't protest. He took his lowered head as confirmation. Rai put his hands to his coat and took it off. He then placed his swords to the side. He wasn't going to take off his clothes. Konoe also awkwardly took off the coat he was wearing. His fingertips were trembling. Rai placed his hand on Konoe's cheek. His body clearly tense.

"Don't think too much about it. You should think of it as a drastic measure to heal your affliction."

Rai told him. It was something he was also trying to tell himself. The hand on Konoe's cheek wrapped around his neck, and pulled him closer. Konoe's head was on his shoulder now. His body wouldn't move, as if he were frozen in place. He could feel his warmth wherever he touched him. There were two black sash-like cloths on the small shelf next to the bed. They seemed to have been intentionally placed there to use during sex with the prostitutes. Rai reached out and grabbed the sashes. He covered the eyes that were looking at him in surprise.

"What are you doing……!?"

"Keep still."

Konoe raised his voice in protest as he tied the sash behind his head.

"Why……"

"Don't take it off."

When Konoe tried to undo the knot behind his head, he grabbed both of his hands and pulled them away. He then tied them with the other sash.

"Take them off! Why are you doing this……"

He once again pulled the complaining Konoe's body closer to

him. He could still feel the warmth from his shoulders.

“If you get violent I won’t be able to make you feel better—if you don’t like it, then you should think about someone other than me.”

He whispered into Konoe’s ear. His body was still tense. His back was covered in sweat. That back moved as he let out a deep breath. He felt his nerves relax just a little. Rai ran his lips softly up his neck. He stuck out his tongue to lick him, Konoe shook in surprise. His bound hands moved to press against Rai’s chest. It wasn’t like he couldn’t move the arms he had tied in front of him to at least that extent. Rai loosened Konoe’s lower clothes, and rolled up the hem of his top. Perhaps surprised when his stomach was touched, he grasped Rai’s hand. Konoe’s hands were hot. Rai stopped his movements.

“……cold.”

He didn’t listen to his quiet protesting. Rai ran his hand from his stomach up to his chest. The feel of his skin was nice. Every time he moved his hand, Konoe’s body trembled.

“……I said you’re cold……ah……!”

He interrupted his words halfway through, grasped Konoe’s shoulder, and pushed him down into the bed onto his stomach. Pressing his body gently onto his back, Konoe’s scent became even stronger than before. He ran his tongue up the nape of his neck.

“Wait, just wait……haa……kh.”

His hand slipped under his top, and stroked his chest. Konoe let out sweet sighs.

“Wai……ngh……!”

Konoe tried to speak, but he gave his ear a small bite.

“Hold still. I’ll make you feel better soon.”

Konoe squirmed wanting to say something. He then moved to bite Rai’s chin. Rai took in a short breath. Konoe let out a growl. He

seemed to be upset about something.

“You’re always like this……you always decide things for yourself.”

He could tell Konoe was angry even through the blindfold. He wasn’t just deciding this for himself. He questioned him back.

“Then what do you want?”

Even if he had his own desires, he wasn’t showing them. Konoe got quiet. He spoke only what he felt without thinking. Konoe was a child. Rai bit his chin then looked up.

“What do you want me to do to you?”

Konoe turned his face away at his questioning words. Feeling only the faintest amount of anger from him, Rai stroked Konoe’s abdomen.

“Mn……”

A sweet sigh escaped from the mouth that only a moment ago was complaining.

“It would only be rough for you if we stopped now.”

Konoe squirmed. He pressed his forehead against his bound hands, trying to suppress his breathing, but he couldn’t hide the rough sighs that escaped from his mouth. Rai stared closely at Konoe.

“Isn’t there someone you hold dear to your heart? You should think about them.”

Konoe stopped his movements at the words spoken to him. He must have been trying to think of someone. However…Konoe propped himself up with both his hands, twisted his upper body, and brought his face close. Lips touched his cheek. It was an awkward kiss. Konoe ran his tongue across his cheek, trying to find his lips. He didn’t say a word. Rai probably didn’t need to exchange words with him either. He grasped Konoe’s chin tightly, kissing him

deeply. He stroked his lips with his tongue. When their tongues met, sweet shocks ran through his body. When their lips parted, Konoe's body crumbled onto the blanket. He then reached between his legs in that position. He directly touched the heat sending out the sighs from inside his body. It was like a mass of warmth. He slowly took out Konoe's member, stroking it as he grasped it lightly. Konoe pushed his face into the blanket, thrusting out his hips. He started to gasp. He grabbed the tip of Konoe's swaying tail and let out his breath by his ear. Clear fluids seeped out from Konoe's cock, dripping onto the blanket and Rai's hand.

"Ah……uwh……"

That should be enough.

Rai stopped moving his hand before taking it away. He slipped his now wet finger into Konoe's tight opening.

"……kh……!"

Konoe's body tensed. When he tried to lift his upper body, he bit his ear. He then used his other hand to hold Konoe's body from behind. He buried his fingertip further inside. Konoe resisted. It was a place that males instinctively feared accepting any sort of heat.

"……what are you doing……!?"

Konoe's bound hands clenched into fists. He whispered into his ears lowered in fear.

"Relax."

He licked that ear. The moment Konoe's tension relaxed, he slipped his finger further inside.

"……aah."

Konoe let out a sweet sigh.

"……kh……haa……!"

He was extremely hot inside. The twitching flesh inside wrapped

around his finger. Every time his finger tip groped around inside him, Konoe's tail swayed as he let out a sound. His finger rubbed inside him slowly. His entrance pulled tightly around the joints of his finger.

"……ah……"

Konoe's body jerked. Up front, clear drops were falling from his cock. He wrapped his hand around that heat and stroked it.

"……n…..a-ah, aah….."

He wondered if Konoe knew he was moving his own hips. Rai increased the amount of fingers buried inside of Konoe's body. It had no problem taking in two fingers, and seemed to be getting even hotter. His warm insides squeezed around his two fingers. Konoe's tail stroked Rai's arm a little. He stopped the movements of his fingers. He also took his hand away that was covering his member.

"……haa……"

Konoe let out a small sigh. Rai grabbed the base of Konoe's tail as he then pushed his own heat against Konoe's opening. Konoe's body tried to move away as if he were afraid. However, Rai held him back from behind. Rai slowly moved his hips forward. When he passed through his narrow opening, Konoe let out a lovely voice, almost screaming.

"……uuwh, ah……kh!!"

His twitching inner walls wrapped around Rai's cock, and gave him unbelievable pleasure. It was tight, but he didn't feel much resistance. Once he finished burying himself inside of him, he noticed his breathing had become awfully elevated. His insides were squirming. Waves of pleasure crashed through the core of his body. Konoe suddenly, but slowly turned toward him. Just that small movement brought him more pleasure. He didn't know what those blindfolded eyes were looking for.

"……what?"

He was a little shocked by the hoarseness of his own voice. Konoe stretched out his neck as he continued to be penetrated. The tip of his nose touched his cheek. He then spoke.

"……Rai."

It shook Rai for some reason. As he tried to hide his surprise, he grabbed Konoe's tail and bit the tip.

"……idiot."

He muttered. Was Konoe trying to tell him he wasn't doing this with just anyone? Konoe didn't say a word. Rai didn't say anything either. He didn't know what words he should say to begin with. However, all he could think about now was telling him whatever he needed to with his own heat. Rai rammed his hips against Konoe's body.

"……aah……ha……!"

He bore through his tight insides as his emotions welled up. Konoe's body tensed as he searched for the spot that would make him feel even better. He thrust at that spot.

"……ngh……ah, stop……no……"

Konoe let out a wheezing sound when he breathed, as if he were a child with a cold.

"If you don't like it, should we stop?"

He whispered into his ear. Konoe's dripping secretions began to stain the blanket. Perhaps unable to speak, Konoe just shook his head. He grasped his slick member, and traced up his neck with his tongue.

"D-Don't touch me……ha……ah……!"

Konoe's body jumped. When he teased the tip, Konoe tried to move his body away from him. Holding his arms down, Rai sped up his hips. He had felt for just a moment that he wanted to touch Konoe's body—that *must* have been because he was in heat.

“Ha……a-aah……I can’t…….mn……!”

His entrance squeezed tightly around him, almost making it difficult to move. Konoe must have been close to his limit. However, Rai was the same. The heat inside of Rai swelled, stimulating him. Each time it happened, he grasped Konoe’s cock. His body shook, white fluid spurting out from the tip. Squeezing tighter and tighter around him, Rai immediately followed after him, releasing his own pleasure inside of Konoe.

“……ha……haa……”

Once he let out his heat, Konoe collapsed onto the blanket. His back covered in sweat moved up and down with his disheveled breathing. Rai removed himself from him, grabbed a cloth placed on the same place as the sashes, and wiped his body. Konoe’s breathing was still heavy. When he removed the blindfold, Konoe covered his eyes with his still bound hands, most likely because it was too bright. Rai rearranged his clothes beside him. He felt unusually empty after releasing his heat. Konoe lifted his upper body. He felt awkward meeting his gaze.

“Use that thing over there. Here.”

He tossed the cloth he pointed out on the small table next to the bed at him. He wouldn’t make eye contact with Konoe. Without watching him start to wipe his body, Rai picked up his coat that had fallen onto the floor.

“Hurry up and get ready. Let’s get out of here before that female comes back.”

Rai told him when he stood up. He wondered why—he didn’t make time to sympathize with Konoe that just received the body of another cat for the first time. When he put his hand against the door, Konoe stopped.

What an awful face he’s making, he thought.

“……what’s wrong?”

“……nothing.”

He turned around, but that was all Konoe said as he averted his gaze.

Later that night, Konoe wrapped himself in his blanket earlier than usual. It had been awkward since they returned from the brothel. They hadn't exchanged many words. It was awkward—even though it didn't need to be. Rai scoffed at himself. Even if Konoe was still avoiding him, there was no need for Rai to avoid him. Konoe was clearly avoiding him. He was easy to figure out as usual. He seemed to bathe as soon as they got back. He must have felt uncomfortable in the places he touched him. He was a little offended, but he could understand the awkwardness he felt seeing the cat he had his first experience of being in heat with. Rai started to tend to his sword as he watched Konoe's back wrapped up in his blanket. Konoe's heat seemed to have died down quite a bit. Perhaps because he had bathed, that scent that had been exciting Rai's body was gone. Rai finished tending his sword, and sheathed it. He then approached the sleeping Konoe. His breathing was somewhat rough, and his brows were knit. He must have had a fever—. Rai touched Konoe's cheek softly. Just as he thought, he was feverish. Taking a male cat's body like that must have been exhausting. He didn't really know since he had never been taken by anyone before. Besides, it was his first time having sex with a male cat, or maybe it was because it was his first time in heat. He couldn't remember his first time very well. Rai figured he should have him drink some medicine, but even though he had medicine for wounds, he realized he didn't have anything to lower fevers in his supplies. In that case, he had no choice but to go buy some in the town. Rai got dressed and left the room. Halfway down the stairs, he saw Bardo at the counter for once, Rai clicked his tongue. Most likely hearing him, Bardo lifted his face.

"Yo."

"……"

He continued down the stairs silently, and headed towards the door without looking at the counter.

"How's Konoe?"

He stopped his feet when he was spoken to.

“What are you talking about?”

He asked without turning to him.

“Konoe’s sleeping, right?”

“It has nothing to do with you.”

“You guys went out even with Konoe in heat like that, and when you came back his eyes were glossy and he said he was going to take a bath, on top of that his heat seemed to have died down. Plus, you’ve been in heat since yesterday, and came back with Konoe looking pretty refreshed. So I can’t think he was with anyone else other than you……”

“Shut up.”

His voice tinged with laughter annoyed him. He threw his short sword toward Bardo without facing him. The short sword made a dull sound as it pierced the wall behind him. He knew that sword hadn’t hit him.

“Bull’s-eye, huh?”

Bardo wore a smile on his face. It was the same smile from back then.

“If an overly sensitive cat like him does it with a cat he’s compatible with during mating season, he’s definitely going to break out into a fever.”

He didn’t know that. However, even though he didn’t know what he should do, obviously there was no way he could ask him to explain it to him. Rai continued to glare at Bardo without a word. The smile on Bardo’s face disappeared.

“……still impossible, huh.”

His voice was low.

“……what are you talking about?”

“I know I did something bad. That hasn’t changed now. But, so much time has passed since then. You could at least talk to me normally……”

Rai turned his gaze away from Bardo.

“Who knows. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

That was a lie. Was he really unable to forgive him—Bardo, who had once tried to offer his own body to a devil, even now? He didn’t know.

“Rai……”

“Anyway, don’t ever show your face around me again.”

As soon as he told him that, Bardo’s serious expression smoothly returned to a smiling face.

“You’re the one who showed up here, aren’t you?”

Bardo stood up, turned around, and took the short sword out of the wall. He then pierced that sword into the counter.

“Well, maybe not. Is Konoe really that important to you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Rai answered coming towards the counter. He took out the short sword, and put it back into its scabbard. This was the closest he had ever been to Bardo since they started staying at this inn. Bardo looked into Rai’s face before he started to speak. As usual, he was long-winded. He hadn’t changed from long ago.

“If Konoe hadn’t said you had to, you wouldn’t be staying in my inn. In other words, you care more about what Konoe has to say than your issues with me.”

“That’s because I didn’t think we’d find another inn during the festival.”

“What a childish excuse.”

Bardo’s hand touched Rai’s chin.

“You never really showed your childish side from the start. So I’m glad I got to see it.”

“Don’t touch me.”

Rai brushed Bardo’s hand away, and dropped his gaze to the floor. He then questioned him in a quiet voice.

“……do you have any medicine?”

“Medicine? To relieve fevers? What, Konoe really does have a fever?”

Bardo shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ve never been able to stomach that part of you.”

Bardo let out a laugh at his words.

“I have medicine, but if he has a fever, it’ll go down on its own soon. That’s right, you should try grooming him.”

“Grooming him?”

He asked back reflexively.

“He just got a fever since his nerves are all worked up. Once he relaxes, the fever will go down.”

He knew what Bardo was telling him wasn’t wrong. Bardo had taught him more than his parents. If what Bardo had taught him was wrong, he probably wouldn’t be alive right now.

“……got it.”

“Good boy.”

He knew it would be pointless to object to the words said to him as he started to walk away.

When he returned to the room, Konoe was still asleep wrapped up in his blanket. Rai let out a small sigh when he approached the bed. Grooming was a sign of affection for cats. He could use being in heat as an excuse for sex, but he had no excuse for grooming him. It was something a parent would do for a child, or siblings for each other—or lovers. He told Bardo without thinking that he understood, but he didn't know if he should do this sort of thing with Konoe. Besides, even if Bardo said it would relax him, could grooming really calm his nerves? Rai stared at Konoe. He remembered wanting to touch him, just for a moment, while he was in heat, but a thought crossed his mind that it wasn't like he *didn't* want to touch Konoe either.

Rai.

Konoe had certainly called out his name quietly. Even though he blindfolded him, even though he took away the freedom of his hands, even though he told him to think about someone else, he called his name. Rai looked into Konoe's face, his eyes still closed as he touched his forehead softly. He was still hot. It was a terrible fever. Rai brought his face close then gently licked his ear. He licked his ear slowly, thoroughly, much more gently than he treated himself. It was sort of a strange feeling. It wasn't just Konoe, it was also calming his own nerves. He had never groomed anyone before. No one had ever groomed him like this either. No—long ago, when he was really young, he had a feeling—his mother had. His mother just hid in the shadow of his strict father, so he didn't have any memories of her being kind to him. Even though he shouldn't, he remembered his mother grooming him. He didn't normally try to remember his mother. Whenever he did, he'd be engulfed in red, overlapping with his cold father, so he didn't try to remember them like this. This was a terribly peaceful—warmth. A warmth…… different from before. Rai closed his eyes. It was completely different from this warmth. Rai licked Konoe's other ear with his eyes still closed. Konoe's scent was comforting. It was a different scent from the one when he was in heat. Rai licked his ear carefully. Konoe who was groaning from his fever earlier was now calm. Once he was done with his ears, next would be his cheek. When he opened his closed eyes, Rai licked slowly up from his chin to around his eyes. Konoe's down hair was much lighter and softer

than his own. He hadn't noticed when he wanted to touch Konoe's body so badly a few hours ago. The tip of his tongue brushed against the corner of his mouth. Those lips he had stolen at that time opened slightly. Konoe squirmed. In that moment, Rai's tongue slipped through Konoe's lips. That brief movement of his tongue during that recoil must have woken him up. Rai moved away from his body. Konoe's body tensed as he curled up. It was like he was refusing him. Why—did he listen to Bardo? Why did he do something that only cats with an intimate relationship did?

It was stupid—.

His chest was stirring. Rai turned away from Konoe's bed, and left the room. He felt uncomfortable. It was like he was running away from him. Rai leaned against the closed door, and looked out the window in the hallway. He couldn't see the moon from that window. Rai returned to the room after a little while. Konoe seemed to be sleeping well. Even though Rai thought it was his own actions that had made him uneasy, it was just his fever. He must have fallen asleep immediately. His breath while he slept wasn't as rough as before. Feeling somewhat relieved, Rai laid down on his bed. His body was exhausted, but he didn't really feel like sleeping. Every once in a while he'd sit up and look out the window. The Moon of Shadows was looking down at Rai. He didn't hate looking up at the moon. He had the feeling he could look at it forever. The bluish gray light of the Moon of Shadows was broken apart by the numerous clouds.
He suddenly felt a disturbance. The hair all over his body stood on end. There was something in the tree next to the window. Perhaps noticing it too, Konoe woke up.

"Get down."

Rai told him without turning around. The shadow wavered. He jumped out of bed and grasped his long sword. A loud sound came from the overgrowth of the tree. The shadow charged toward the window. The shadow was a cat whose face was covered by something like a mask. At almost the same time, Rai kicked off the bed and jumped out the window. Their swords clashed. Their balance crumbled. The shadow fell to the ground. Once they landed, they both jumped out at the same time, their swords

clashing once again. His opponent was quite skilled. Rai didn't think he was the target of his attack. He must have been one of Leaks's pursuers. He held his breath. Their swords smashed against each other again. From the force of his attack Rai could tell they were pretty evenly matched. If he relaxed his hand even a little, he would probably end up receiving that sword. At that moment, he heard a song. He reflexively looked up—at the window of the room Konoe should have been in. He saw Konoe singing from the window. It was gentle song. A white light enveloped Rai's body. The moment Rai thought he didn't understand Konoe at all—the cat in front of him swung his sword down. He didn't have time to think about that right now. Luckily, his opponent didn't have a Sanga. He knew he could drive away his opponent with his own sword. Rai kicked the cat's chest hard. His opponent failed to dodge it. He reflexively knocked away the sword from the cat who lost his balance. The cat's sword fell from his hand. He immediately scooted back. Rai slowly approached the cat to close the distance between them. The match seemed to be over. However, at that moment, the cat jumped. He leaped toward him with a growl, his teeth and claws bared. Those claws—grazed his right eye. He felt feverish. He gasped. His vision was covered with the color of blood. He could no longer hear the song. Rai let out a quiet laugh. His opponent stepped back at his unusual behavior. Rai rushed toward him. The distance between him and the cat narrowed all at once as he let out a roar. He then pierced the cat's throat with his sword. There wasn't even enough time for his opponent to scream. He looked away as blood spurt out from the cat's throat, and mouth. Blood fell in drops from the tip of his sword sticking out from the back of his neck. Rai pulled his sword out from the cat. His body crumbled. Rai licked the blood dripping from his sword. It had the warm taste of red metal.

"……his blood is sweet."

Rai muttered, the light returning to his eye.
What was that just now?
He didn't understand the meaning of the words he mumbled. Rai's gaze raced around his surroundings. He smelled a strange scent. A raw smell. Fallen at his feet was the corpse of a cat still convulsing slightly. A red stream flowed from his split throat. The sword he

was grasping was coated in blood. He had no memory of any of this. He remembered his opponent swinging his hand at him. His right eye ached. He touched his eye patch with the tips of his fingers. There were traces he had received a blow. Rai knit his brows, and let out a sigh to steady his breathing. His blood had been stirring since earlier. He had been starting to lose his memories—ever since he met Konoe. He felt impatient. Rai's tail swung wide as he clicked his tongue.

"……damn it……!"

Devastated, he thrust his sword into the ground. He gripped the handle tightly, a violent flame welled up inside him. The body of his opponent had already stopped convulsing. His eyes were opened wide. He couldn't just leave it there. This was the middle of town. It would definitely cause a scene. The forest around Ransen had yet to be encroached by the Void. He could probably bury it there. At the very least, he wanted to show the body some respect. Rai approached the corpse so he could pick it up, but at that moment…

"You can't go against the desires of your heart. Haven't you realized that yet?"

He turned his gaze toward the direction of the voice. Froud was standing with his arms crossed, leaning against the trunk of a tree. Just seeing him there made him uneasy.

"……how long have you been there?"

He asked in a low voice.

"The whole time. You didn't notice? I must be pretty impressive for a cat not to notice me, even though they're normally so sensitive to presences."

Froud lifted his body from the trunk of the tree, approaching Rai as he floated in midair. His body melting into the night, with only his exposed mouth warped into a smile, was creepy.

"I saw it all. From the beginning to the end, aaall of it. Fufu.

Froud's suggestive tone made Rai glare at him sharply.

“……just what are you thinking?”

His breathing was a little painful. Rai continued his words after letting out a short sigh.

“What are you planning?”

“What am I planning for what?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

Rai removed the sword from the ground he pierced and aimed it at him.

“Fufu.”

Froud’s wiry black tail swayed as he smiled a toothy grin.

“You’re the one who’s playing dumb. You’ve come alive today. Amazing. You’re shining brightly……soon you won’t be able to hide it anymore, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re going to make me tell you? The answer has fallen over there.”

Froud’s slender, pointed chin jerked towards Rai’s feet. It was the corpse of the cat whose blood was still flowing from his wound.

“I understand how you feel very well, white kitty-chan. You want warmth, don’t you? A warmth closer, and deeper than any other. That surely resides inside of the living.”

Froud swung one arm down. With the sharp sound of wind, a scythe-like blade appeared from his wrist to his elbow. With the tip of that blade, Froud scooped up the blood flowing from the corpse of the cat, and once again lifted his arm. Red drops fell from the shiny white of his blade.

“It’s still warm. It still has the warmth of life burning in it.”

"……stop."

Rai looked away.

"You know what I'm talking about though."

Froud's voice was low. It was a sharp voice different from the frivolous tone he had been using up until then. Rai reflexively looked at Froud's face. He couldn't make out his expression because of his mask.

"……fufu."

Froud immediately went back to his usual self as he laughed. He then brought the blade in his arm to his mouth. He licked at the drops of blood. Rai frowned and narrowed his eyes. It looked like a ritual held in bad taste.

"Why did you appear before me?"

"Because it's fun, of course."

Froud said as he licked the blood clinging to the corners of his mouth.

"Don't mess with me."

"Seriously."

Froud frowned as if he had said something unthinkable.

"It's really fun messing with you though. You excite me. It's a great way to kill time."

"You're an eyesore, get out of my sight."

"Once we take care of Leaks. Until then, you're my toy."

He felt like punching Froud who intentionally chose words to hit a nerve. He knew he was provoking him, anger churned in the depths of his stomach.

"The hair on your tail is standing on end. Are you angry? Fufu,

what, it's just for a little longer. You should realize it soon. It's pointless to lie about it, right? You can't deny your instinctual desires with cheap excuses. Humans were the same way. At that time……"

Froud stretched out one arm then bent it toward him with some force. The wind coiled up with that movement. The wind wrapped around the corpse of the fallen cat in front of him, and lifted him up.

"As long as it's all right with you, I'll welcome you. Whenever you feel like coming to me, I'll welcome you any time, okay?"

Froud clad in glossy black took the corpse in his arms as he spoke.

"……what do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

Froud shrugged his shoulders, starting to slowly float away as he held onto the corpse.

"What do you plan on doing with that guy?"

"You were going to bury him, right? I'll do it for you. For free. More importantly, why don't you hurry on back to your room?"

"……room?"

"Your precious kitten has used up all his strength and passed out. How pitiful."

Konoe's singing voice crossed his mind. He forced himself to sing even in his feverish state. Thanks to him he was able to settle things with ease, but he didn't tell him to sing to that extent. His opponent wasn't paired, so it would have been possible for him to face him alone. He unconsciously clicked his tongue. Rai turned away from Froud above him in the sky, and started to walk away. His figure wrapped in moonlight floated high into the sky. The way he held the corpse in his arms made him look like a god of death. Rai looked away and headed back to the inn.

“I wonder when you’ll realize it……”

Froud’s whisper didn’t reach Rai’s ears.

When he returned to the room, Konoe was passed out by the window. Rai lifted Konoe up and laid him on the bed. His skin was surprisingly hot to the touch. There was a light sweat clinging to him. He was an idiot for singing while he had a fever. He could have won without that song—without Konoe’s song. He wondered absent mindedly if singing while he had a fever meant their bond had deepened somehow. Even though their bond was deepened, his own affliction had also deepened. Rai gently licked Konoe’s neck. He squirmed. Earlier he had regretted grooming Konoe like that, but now Rai didn’t hesitate. He tended to him carefully from his chest up. Konoe groaned, but Rai didn’t stop his movements. He didn’t seem to be waking up. Rai lifted his body and wrapped him tightly in his blanket. If he still had a fever by tomorrow he would have to give him some medicine. Rai sat on his own bed and looked out the window. He always looked up at the moon on the nights he couldn’t sleep. The night wind creeping in from the widow brushed against his cheek. The silver light emitting from the moon shined brightly on Rai. The cold air flowing in from the window made it really feel like winter had arrived. He suddenly thought the cold wind probably wouldn’t be good for Konoe’s fever, and closed the window. The guiding leaf faintly illuminated the interior of the room, so it wasn’t all that dark. Rai knit his brows, closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh. There was an uneasiness in the corner of his heart. It was like there was a black fog taking over inside. Hearing the faint sleeping breath inside of the silence, Rai turned his gaze to the bed next to his.

There was what Froud had said—himself covered in blood, and then Konoe.

Don’t hesitate.

Kill it.

What?

This impulse.

This impulse of madness.

Even if he were to be consumed by a pitch black madness, the moon would continue to shine on him without change, Rai thought as he looked at the moon he could no longer see.